

## Interview with John Hurd Willett

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

JOHN HURD WILLETT

Interviewed by: Richard Jackson

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Q: This is the oral history of John Hurd Willett, conducted in Paris on December 21, 1998 by Richard Jackson. To begin with, could you tell us a little bit about how you became interested in foreign affairs? Was it something you assimilated growing up or through your education?

WILLETT: In part, Dick, it was the fact that my father had lived abroad working for John J. McCloy in the German reconstruction of the Ruhr Valley following World War II. He spoke of this experience with enthusiasm and vivacity, and that whetted my appetite, even as a kid of 11 or 12. Then, of course, there were certain books I read. By the time I entered college I already knew I wanted some sort of a job that would get me abroad, and that the Foreign Service was best placed to fulfill such an aspiration. Reading Lawrence Durrell further nourished my enthusiasm, specifically *The Alexandria Quartet* and, of course, that hilarious little book he wrote called *Esprit de Corps: Scenes from the Diplomatic Life*. I recall sentences from it, like "The Yugoslav ambassador's wife was borne off screaming into the liquid, enigmatic night." It was that sort of thing. I thought diplomacy would combine for me a respectable profession, adventure, the security of a fixed income and the excitement of dealing with world affairs. There's a kind of the history of why I wanted to take a crack at the Foreign Service.

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*Q: You were born in Northampton, Massachusetts, and grew up around there?*

WILLETT: Yes. Until the age of 12, I lived in Northampton, where my father was professor of economics at Smith College. We moved to New York City in 1953, and Dad rejoined the brokerage house on Wall Street which, in fact, he had founded with Ferdinand Eberstadt in the '20s, after graduating from Princeton. I attended a Catholic school in Manhattan for a couple of years and then a prep school in western Massachusetts, mainly because I wanted to go back to the neck of the woods where I'd been born. In the autumn of 1958 I entered Kenyon, but my first trip to Europe that same summer, a kind of high school graduation present, was one more building block in the long process of joining the Foreign Service. Everything I saw was so exciting and new. That first trip abroad made me want to double my existence.

*Q: I see, John, that after you graduated from Kenyon College you studied in Italy, France, Sweden, spent a couple of years in the Peace Corps and had an eclectic series of jobs: world work, bartender, tutor.*

WILLETT: Well, those jobs were mostly due to the fact that I was a lousy student. I had troubles in prep school, troubles at Kenyon. At the end of my second year, the Dean recommended I take a breather. I did so, and it turned out to be the most enriching year of my life. I studied three months at the Università per Stranieri in Perugia, Italy, then on my own — I was only 20, and I'm particularly proud of this part of my life — I found a job with a Berlitz school in Cuneo, Italy, and went north to that peculiar little town in the Piemonte, where I taught for three months. From there I traveled to Paris and located a job in another language school. During this “sabbatical” abroad, I learned two languages well, so it was, in a way, one of the richest, most formative years of my life. I plunged deeply into two cultures, those of Italy and France, and fell in love with both of them.

*Q: The study in Stockholm came later.*

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WILLETT: That came later, after I graduated from Kenyon.

*Q: Kenyon was in international affairs?*

WILLETT: No, not at all. Kenyon was French literature. But I later discovered that a good knowledge of French, or rather a good knowledge of languages in general, is one of the most useful tools a Foreign Service officer can possess.

*Q: So you finished Kenyon then joined the Peace Corps.*

WILLETT: I finished Kenyon, went to Stockholm for one year to work and study concurrently, and while there I was accepted into the Peace Corps. They didn't inform me what country I'd be assigned to, but they told me a portion of the training might be in Ankara. To give you an indication of my ignorance of the world at the time, I said to myself, Ankara? They surely mean Anchorage, Alaska? Why am I going to Anchorage?

Well, I was accepted into the Peace Corps and began a training period. The other trainees and I lived at Pyne Hall in Princeton for six weeks, before passing another six weeks at Robert College outside Istanbul. Then I headed out alone to a small town on the Turkish- Greek-Bulgarian border in Thrace to teach 300 kids how to speak English, a great experience. I learned Turkish to boot, by the way. I was the only foreigner in the village, so it was sink or swim.

*Q: And in that time, your ambition to join the Foreign Service crystallized, and you took the Foreign Service Exam in Ankara.*

WILLETT: Exactly. I took it in Ankara in, if I remember correctly, December 1966. Of course, it was, and still is, given only once a year, isn't it?

*Q: Yes.*

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WILLETT: If that often. Sometimes they cancel it.

*Q: That's true.*

WILLETT: I failed the exam with a resounding 56 out of 100. This was a source, at the time, of despair for me, because I thought I'd never make it in. With a score that bad on the written exam, I didn't believe I stood a chance.

*Q: That was in the days when they still gave five points for you foreign languages.*

WILLETT: So I only got a 51, you're telling me. Well, if I'd known that, I might not have tried a second time.

When I finished the Peace Corps, I returned to New York looking for employment. Still wanting something in the area of foreign affairs, I got a job with the UN Secretariat for the 22nd General Assembly, working in the Security Council and the General Assembly Hall and the Committee Rooms as a kind of lowly “water boy” — you know, making sure delegates' pencils were sharpened and saying, “Mr. Ambassador, please call your mission,” distributing documents, whatever. Nonetheless, in the three months I was there, I learned a lot about the way multilateral diplomacy functions, and I saw for the first time that my country, which I felt very close to, was a source of great animosity out there. I remember hearing terrible diatribes leveled against the United States in the fall of 1967. We all know what happened in June '67, so you can imagine what the speeches were like in the General Assembly Hall my first autumn there.

*Q: That's interesting.*

WILLETT: That work ended, and though I wanted to prolong it, they said, “Sorry, you knew you were only a temp when you took the job.” I got in touch with a friend of mine from Sweden, an American named Charles Gatewood, who has become a rather well known photographer — he did a book with William Burroughs called Sidetrapping — and

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I said, "Charlie, you and I are going to take a trip across Africa." "Sure," he answered, "why not?" He bought, you know, 100 rolls of film, and we went down to Hudson's, outfitted ourselves and took off. We arrived on a freighter in Casablanca, and hitchhiked from there to Alexandria, Egypt. Then Charlie peeled off and I continued up the Nile to Khartoum, on boats, trains, whatever — trucks — then got a job as workaway on a Sudanese freighter out of Port Sudan. Because the Suez Canal was closed — again for the reasons we all know — it went around the Cape of Good Hope. There was something called the "Cape surcharge" in those days.

And it was on that boat, in the summer of 1968, that the wireless announced the invasion of Prague. The Yugoslav officers, interestingly enough, turned on me, because I was from a superpower; they put both superpowers in the same basket. I also received a telegram from my dad informing me that the December 1968 Foreign Service exam had been canceled.

So there I was with, you know, an open door and nothing in front of me. When the trip ended and I found myself back in New York, I got a job with the publishing house of Holt, Rinehart and Winston, an interesting period because it taught me to pay attention to commas and semicolons and syntax. After a year I resigned from my job at Holt, Rinehart and Winston. I enjoyed the work and was sorry to leave, but I wanted to try this exam again. I got confirmation that indeed it would be given. Now, I'll be precise about the locus here. The exam would be given the first Saturday of December, 1969, and I asked whether I could take it at the Consulate General in Venice. I had this romantic notion of studying in Venice and taking the exam there. State said, "Sure." At the end of August 1969, shortly before leaving, the United States, I received in the mail a ticket, which I have kept. It says, "John Willett is inscribed to take the Foreign Service Exam at the American Consulate in Venice on December such-and-such 1969" — you know — "Admit One" — whatever.

So off to Venice with a steamer trunk full of books, swearing I wouldn't screw up again. I set a rigid schedule for myself. Since I'd been such a lousy student, I knew that if I didn't

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apply strict personal discipline I'd be in trouble. From 5:30 in the morning till 7:30 at night, with minibreaks of 10 minutes and a major break of a couple of hours after lunch to walk around and clear my head, I worked hard. I read Time and Newsweek and the Herald Tribune cover to cover every week, and, you know, just took a bath in American history, elementary math, economics, interpretation of graphs — all those things I thought might appear on the exam. About ten days before the exam I said to myself, Go on around, drop in, shake hands at the Consulate, you know, just get to know them. I hadn't been anywhere near the Venice Consulate up to then.

I walked to Academia, where I believed the American Consulate was, near the British Consulate. It wasn't there. I looked all around and saw the brass plaque for the British Consulate. I checked out the phone book, but it wasn't there either, and I thought, Well, this is ridiculous. I looked at the ticket, which still read "American Consulate General, Venice," then walked to American Express. The man said, "Oh, they closed last year."

Well, that was a blow. I quickly fired off a night letter to my dad saying, "Jesus, call Washington. Tell them the situation." (Night letters don't exist any more; they were slower and cheaper than telegrams, but a lot faster than letters.) And sure enough, 48 hours later, I got a sheepish telegram from PER saying, "Whoops, we goofed. You've been inscribed to take the exam in Milan. The Consulate has been alerted. You're expected." I went back to my books.

The day before the exam, I took an early morning train. I arrived in Milan about four in the afternoon, jumped in a cab, rushed to the Consulate and there was a young man — now at this point I'm about 29 — a man about my age. I wonder if he'll ever read this. I don't remember his name. He was beautifully dressed — beautifully dressed — in a subdued Italian suit, sitting behind his government issue desk — an old one, when they still made them solid and impressive — in an ornate office with a flag on either side of him, Consular flag and U.S. flag. I went in there and introduced myself, shaking like a leaf, and he said to me, "Ah, you're John Willett. You're the guy who's ruined my weekend." Because, as it

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turned out, he'd planned a trip with his family, and suddenly this telegram arrived saying, "You have to monitor Willett's exam." He wasn't happy, and he let me know it. You know, I felt a great, crushing weight of guilt.

"Well, " I asked, "look, can I ask you a few questions?" And he answered, "Go ahead. What do you want to know?" He was sitting back with his legs crossed, and he looked so sure of himself, so untouchable, that I despaired. I started asking him economic questions and something about the New Deal — you know, ridiculous, of course it was ridiculous — so at one point he leaned forward, put his elbows on the desk, crossed his hands and with a sardonic smile said to me, "Do you mind if I ask you a question?" And I said, "Oh, no, not at all, Mr. Consul." "When was Picasso's Blue Period?" And I said, "Oh my God! I don't know! I don't know!" See," he said, "You can't study for the Foreign Service Exam."

Well, he was wrong. Although when I came out of the exam — in those days it was an all-day exam, four hours in the morning and four in the afternoon, something like that — though I felt I'd done better than the first time, I still thought I'd screwed it up. At any rate, *alea iacta est*. There was nothing more to do, since I certainly wasn't going to take the exam again. So I went and had a few bottles of wine and, well, I don't know quite how the evening ended. It's probably not for this tape.

Anyway, I returned to Venice and got a job as tutor for the children of some wealthy American families traveling around Europe. We were in the ski resort of Morzine, France, when a telegram arrived from my father. This was in — it must have been — March of 1970: "CONGRATULATIONS. YOU DID IT. YOU GOT AN 81 ON THE EXAM AND YOUR OLDER SISTER LYNNE JUST HAD ANOTHER BABY." You could tell from the telegraph that his spirits were in great shape, because he must have been worried stiff about what his son was going to do with his life.

As for me, I floated. Of course, I had to write an essay — I'm not sure whether they still ask for that; they probably do — on what the formative events in my life were, or what the

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formative event was. I remember — and this was germane to the oral exam — I remember putting down in this autobiographic sketch that when I was a kid in Northampton, I'd wanted to be a garbage collector. I used to collect the neighbors' garbage and dump it on my parents' driveway. When I took the oral exam, John Stutesman, Ambassador Stutesman, said, "Tell me, have you drawn some link, now that you're almost 30, between garbage collecting and diplomacy?" They'd obviously read the essay. I squirmed, but they were being nice; perhaps they liked the candor. I got into the Foreign Service and, before entering on duty, took off on another Africa trip.

I put an ad in the paper for a traveling companion, and off we went, this time in a car, driving from Casablanca down to Dakar, inland to Bamako, Mali, up past Timbuktu to Bourem and back north across the Algerian Desert. In those days you could travel these regions without too much trouble. It's more problematic today. Anyway that trip further increased my love of North Africa, of the North African desert.

Q: That was nine or ten years after the great wave of Moroccan independence in 1960. This was a new continent, and there was a lot of hope. How did it seem to you, crossing those countries? Did they seem like the future?

WILLETT: For me, Dick, I have to tell you I didn't look at what was happening in those countries through political eyes. For me it was one big adventure. I had this bug: I hadn't known what to do with my life, and I just was out there. I'd be attributing to myself a sensitivity and political acumen I didn't possess if I pretended that while heading north through the mud of the Niger River I was thinking about African politics. I wasn't.

There are a few things I remember, like seeing the young king Hassan II greeted by his people, hearing the ululations of the women as he went through the crowd. The first time I went to Africa in 1968, I hitchhiked through Libya, deep into the Libyan Desert, south of Tobruk, to a place called Al-Jaghbug, which has a Koranic academy and is totally off limits now.



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*Q: That's down towards Kufra.*

WILLETT: Exactly. There was a famous caravan route from Al-Jaghbug, Libya to Siwa, Egypt, across the border. I did notice on the second trip that things were not so free and easy as they'd been first time around; these countries were more in control of their own destinies and had the inferiority complex — there's no other way to put it — of newly independent states that have to show their mettle, the way we did after 1776.

*Q: But the kind of books one reads today, the Kaplan book, Ends of the Earth, the travelogues of getting across Africa - you with a tendency towards writing - that wasn't on your mind on that trip.*

WILLETT: I kept intimate journals on all my African trips and have, indeed, written a book built around the three of them, each one lasting about three months. All three were arduous and, at times, dangerous, but for political reasons, never because of the elements. I knew the desert was a dangerous place, and I paid attention...

*Q: It was so dangerous in the sense of politics, you are the middle of some chaos, or some Ali Shiftis.*

WILLETT: Well later on, after joining the Foreign Service, when I got married in 1977, my bride, Chantal, and I and a nephew of mine took off in a Land Rover and drove from Tunis to Mombassa. I'd taken three months leave without pay. That was far and away the most dangerous trip of all. In Algeria in 1968 the police in Tembisa arrested me, called me a spy, asked me how I could speak French. And when I, in a sort of smart aleck response, said, "Well, how come you speak French? You're not French, either," I got knocked around a bit. Finally, after someone read my journal and realized I wasn't putting down the emplacements of ack ack guns, they let me go.

And there were other rough situations. In Egypt, I was spat upon. They threw stones at me in Al-Mina. Crossing the border from Aswan to Wadi Halfa was physically rough and

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politically rough, but we made it. I say “we,” because at that point I'd joined up with an English guy about my age. At least Khartoum, in the Sudan, was not the kind of virulently anti-American place it is now, where the Islamists have taken over and indulge in their penchant for cutting off hands.

*Q: Well, even Al-Minya is today the center of fundamentalism iEgypt.*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: Probably even then more fundamentalist than the rest of Egypt.*

WILLETT: This cross I'm wearing is, in fact, a Copt cross I bought in Al-Minya as a souvenir of that trip. The church has been destroyed, and I think that most Copts in that part of Egypt are departed or dead. But those trips just kept on hammering at me and reinforcing within me my desire to be in the Foreign Service.

*Q: So you kept after the Foreign Service? You went back then a second time, took the written exam in '69, the oral in 1970, then made this long driving trip.*

WILLETT: And in April of 1971, I raised my hand and took the vow. That's the whole chapter leading up to the Foreign Service.

*Q: So, John, you're in the Foreign Service. It looks like from your first post in Gaborone in Botswana you're back to Africa. You went through probably a period preparing for the Service in Washington, the usual A-100 course. Did they do a good job? Did you learn anything in it?*

WILLETT: The A-100 course I thought was good, although I found one of the consular classes, the one dealing with citizenship law, awfully dull. I regretted very quickly, however, that I hadn't paid more attention in that course, because the issues addressed in it were exactly those I'd be obliged to confront. Later I had to wade through heavy manuals

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to solve the problems I was dealing with. My life would have been easier had I paid more attention in that A-100 class.

After the A-100 class, I worked briefly for John Stutesman, at his request, in PER. Then they said to me, "Okay, where would you like to go?" Well, everybody in my A-100 class had put down these sexy European places — Paris, Rome, London, Bonn. But I'd been to all of them, with the exception of Bonn, and I still had the Peace Corps ethic in me, kind of an itch for Africa. I wanted to get back to the bush. I said, "You send me to a place where you can't get anybody else to go." They laughed, but it didn't take them long to find one: Gaborone, Botswana, "for singles only." There were only four embassies in town: the United States, the Chinese, the British, and one other — the Russians, I think.

*Q: It was independent of South Africa by then.*

WILLETT: Oh, yes. Run by Seretse Khama, an extraordinary person; he would have been a great man in whatever country he lived. He was so... statesmanlike. I can't think of another word.

I took a long flight from Washington to New York to Kinshasa to Pretoria, spent a night in Pretoria, and then was driven north, across the border to Gaborone. The post was run by a man with one of those highfalutin names that only exist in the Foreign Service. Him and me. That was it. As my first job in the Foreign Service, it was a disconcerting experience. I'd been sent there TDY, because that's the way State wanted it. So on the one hand, I found myself making a lot of money. As a bachelor on TDY with embassy housing, I was able to bank my entire salary. There was no place to spend it in Gaborone, I can tell you that. On the other hand, my boss was an odd person, and so was his wife.

*Q: He had the rank of ambassador?*

WILLETT: No.

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*Q: Or charg#?*

WILLETT: Yes. If I remember correctly, it was charg#. I believe he was also the rep to Lesotho and Swaziland. Eventually we sent Ambassadors to each of those countries, but at the time, in 1971, we had one man for all three. I didn't get along with him, and I'm afraid that on occasion I let it show. I didn't respect him. I didn't think he had enough energy, enough wisdom. His desk was piled high with unfinished projects. I swore I'd never get myself into that position.

Eventually he was pulled out, replaced by a former Congressman, a Black. That was another disaster, a real disaster. His wife was a racist, towards the Botswana. At the end of another three months — we're now at Christmas in 1971 — State said, “Okay, you've been six months on TDY. That's the most anybody can be on TDY, so we'd like to convert you to a regular assignment, and you would do another year and a half there.” I refused. I felt it was a horrendous situation. The chief of mission and his wife were far more interested in their housing and their comforts and their privileges and immunities and perquisites than they were in the business of raw diplomacy, of improving relations between the U.S. and Botswana.

There was one important occurrence while I was there: the China vote in the UN, in the fall of 1971. Since there was a Chinese embassy in Gaborone, the Chinese had managed to convince the government of Botswana to vote in favor of Chinese membership on the Security Council. So these incredible instructions, straight from the Secretary, were zooming in every few days. You know, “Go see the President of the Republic and tell him we're going to have a crisis in bilateral relations if they don't vote with us.” If memory serves me right, they didn't, and China got on the Security Council. That was my first big lesson in the limits of power politics. In reality, our leverage over Gaborone was minimal.

*Q: We must have had an aid program.*

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WILLETT: We did.

*Q: -putting some money into it, but not enough.*

WILLETT: Yes, but it was still minimal in the sense that the country is sitting on diamonds and other minerals. It's extraordinarily rich in cattle. And the people were fairly well off. In fact, at one point it even became a rather vogueish place to go because of the Okavango Swamps, where Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton got married, or something like that, I don't know. I remember that Botswana was in all the papers some years later.

*Q: It's a large country, with beautiful game parks — WILLETT: That's right.*

*Q: Were you able to get out of the capital?*

WILLETT: Not a great deal. I didn't have a car. I do recall at one point going north into the Kalahari Desert and visiting a place where — I think I've got this right — Stanley is buried, the Stanley of “Dr. Livingston, I presume.”

*Q: That was the desert of Laurens Van der Post, his writings.*

WILLETT: Yes. It doesn't have the dramatic beauty of the Saharan dunes, but it is a lovely place, and the people who live there, the Bushmen, are gentle and good.

*Q: But life in the capital was dominated by the then reality of South Africa?*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: How did you notice that, day to day?*

WILLETT: Oh, by the way the white people swaggered around town as if they owned it.

*Q: Ones who'd come over from South Africa?*

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WILLETT: A lot of the time. Mind you, Botswana was never...

*Q: Because of the illegal gambling and that sort of thing?*

WILLETT: No.

*Q: It was not that.*

WILLETT: I was going to say, Botswana never prostituted itself — iit Lesotho that became the kind of “Las Vegas of southern Africa”?

*Q: Yes, I think that's right.*

WILLETT: Yes, and maybe even Swaziland jumped in there eventually. But to my knowledge, Botswana did not. There was something austere but at the same time noble about Seretse Khama. He was not the sort of man who would sell out to gambling casinos to get a little more money for his country.

*Q: He didn't have to, from what you said.*

WILLETT: You're right. I don't think he had to.

Everything was very informal. I mean, Jackie Khama, the President's daughter, would bang on the door, and we'd go off to a party or something. There was hunting, horseback riding; it was a pretty good life. Had it not been for working conditions in the embassy, I might have stayed on. In my quarter century in the Foreign Service, the only efficiency report I ever protested was my first one. The Office Director at the time for Southern Africa, the one who'd talked me into going to Botswana, took the report and wrote a powerful counter appraisal, completely erasing the rater's negative innuendoes. And I thought, Boy, this is a good outfit I'm in, where that sort of thing can happen.

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Q: But still, you left there for Tunis then, your next post. You had a few second thoughts what this Foreign Service was all about after that first experience.

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: And what did you find in Tunis? Where did they put you in that embassy?*

WILLETT: There I was Consul. I had my own building. It was a consular job with a lot of political overtones, and I worked closely, off and on, with Frank Wisner, who was the economic counselor there at the time. The first Ambassador was a man named John Calhoun, who left under a cloud.

*Q: A very traditional, old line sort of a person.*

WILLETT: Yes, well, he was replaced by one of the men I came most to respect in the Foreign Service, Talcott Seelye, who hailed from my neck of the woods. Seelye Hall at Smith College in Northampton is named after his family. He was from western Massachusetts, he knew Mt. Holyoke, he knew the nooks and crannies of New England lore, and I just liked him tremendously.

*Q: Calhoun was asked to leave by the Tunisians or from our point of view?*

WILLETT: Us.

*Q: Something in his personal life.*

WILLETT: Yes....

*Q: I see. I see.*

WILLETT: So, in Tunis, I was living out in Sidi Bou Said in a lovely house overlooking the Bay of Tunis. I still had my Land Rover and I could still go horseback riding; it was a lot of

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fun. I made friends in the artists' colony at Sidi Bou Said. That painting there is by Brahim Dahak, a fairly well known Tunisian artist, still living. And I became friends with Frank Wisner. He lived in La Marsa, I think it was, or perhaps Gamarth? I can't remember. I could almost see his house from mine.

*Q: A little house on the beach.*

WILLETT: Right on the beach. Frank took me on a hunting trip once, in the mountains on the Algerian border.

Through the Consulate I made friends with a number of Tunisians. One of my best friends was Hammadi Assid, who eventually became the Paris representative of the Arab League, and who died young of a heart attack. Hammadi also lived in Sidi Bou Said, with his German wife, and we palled around a lot. It was Frank who introduced us, and we stayed friends over the years. Hammadi also introduced me to Chadli Klibi, later President of the Arab League, whom I saw on a couple of occasions in Washington.

So Tunis sort of erased those first six months in Botswana, which I don't want to paint as a miserable time. It was just that the professional side of my life there was less enriching than I'd expected. In Tunis it blossomed. I found myself drafting a few rudimentary political reports, helping the Ambassador, taking trips with him. A couple of these were disastrous — I mean, really disastrous, one of them almost fatal. On a boat in the Bay of Tunis, Talcott Seelye ruptured his esophagus and, with ten hours to live, had to be flown out. They operated on the airplane. That was a close one. Then we got lost in the Chott el Jerid in the south of Tunisia. But we remained friends through it all, and though I haven't seen him in years, it was always a pleasure when we got together and reminisced. I know that Talcott has become a controversial figure...

*Q: I had drinks with him Tuesday night. Well, John, this was maybe a dozen years or so after Tunisian independence, and Bourguiba had consolidated pretty well. He was beginning to set in motion the famous reforms. I don't know whether the episode of*



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drinking water on television in the month of Ramadan was in that period, but how did this all seem to you then, the evolution of Tunisia, the impact of Bourguiba, the progressivism, the growth of the middle class for which the Tunisians are so famous?

WILLETT: Although I'd been led to believe that life in the Arab world was tricky, risky, that you had to watch it, that the people were dour and reserved and anti-American, I felt very little of that in Tunisia. I don't remember the drinking of water. I do remember an embarrassingly candid television appearance where at one point Bourguiba he held up the pinky of his right hand with his thumb pressed to the back of it and talked about being born with one testicle no bigger than a pois chiche. He said, "Il y en avait une qui n'était pas plus grande qu'un pois chiche." That was a little shocking on national television; it was obvious he was getting senile.

*Q: It was obvious, at that time.*

WILLETT: Yes. It was obvious he was getting senile, because he'd wander in public.

*Q: Was he still calling for his old friend Hooker Doolittle?*

WILLETT: I don't remember that. I do recall that his minister of foreign affairs, Masmoudi, was pushing for union with Libya, which really drove us through the roof, because this was only a couple of years after Qadhafi's coup in Tripoli.

*Q: The coup was in early September '69.*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: Then, in fact, we were still in the process of closing down, negotiating out of Wheelus.*

WILLETT: Exactly. But Masmoudi's scheme didn't come to much. There was one dramatic day when the Tunisian/Libyan border was airbrushed out of existence and everything was supposed to become one.

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Tunisia had high unemployment, even though it was doing better than most other countries in North Africa. That's when the open/porous border motif went the way of all flesh, because all these Tunisians went to Libya looking for work. The Tunisians themselves are an open people, easy to deal with. They produced wine you could buy and drink. They were by no means ultraorthodox Islamists.

*Q: Bourguiba himself was very much pushing in that direction, vermuch pushing for an expanded role for women, education for women —*

WILLETT: Exactly.

*— getting away from the chador, and so on.*

WILLETT: Yes, and in fact, I would compare Bourguiba in certain respects, certain respects only, to Mustafa Kemal Atat#rk, in that he took an archconservative society and managed to turn it around. This is not to say that Islamic extremism doesn't exist at all in Tunisia; it does. In fact, there was a period a few years ago when we were very worried about the direction Tunisia was heading. But the Tunisian people are sophisticated and worldly, and I think they've arrived at a middle ground in all of this.

I became friends with a Tunisian named Abbas Feriani, a wine producer, Ch#teau Feriani. We used to buy his wine. Tunisians would dance, discreetly, but they would dance. You could see them drinking in public. The beach restaurants north of Tunis were lined with Tunisians enjoying the sun, in bathing suits, drinking wine. It was a relaxing and pleasant place, an agreeable place to work.

*Q: The PLO headquarters were not yet there.*

WILLETT: Yes, the PLO was there.

*Q: They were already there.*

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WILLETT: No, the PLO headquarters were not there, but there was PLO office.

Q: But the Tunisians were nevertheless fairly focused on the Middle East situation, considered themselves more involved in it than, say, the Moroccans were, where you later served.

WILLETT: They were more involved in part, I think, simply because they were closer to the situation by 800 miles. And they did have Qadhafi right next door. When as a young guy with a backpack I hitchhiked across North Africa in the spring of 1968, there was a significant difference between Tunisia and Algeria in the way I was received. The Algerians were a hard people, decidedly opposed to the United States, whereas in Tunisia, the fact that the hearts of the average man were firmly with the Palestinian cause did not translate into the kind of open hostility I encountered in Algeria, or, to a certain degree, in Libya — surprisingly somewhat less in Libya — or, of course, in Egypt, which was on the front line.

Mind you, being in the Consulate, my day-to-day chores involved not so much politics as, you know, who gets a visa, who doesn't get a visa. I remember one of the most astounding days in my brief consular career was when a tall, elegant, obviously aristocratic man walked into the Consulate asking for a visa. I said, "May I have your passport, please?" and he replied, "Yes, you can have my passport." The man turned out to be King Carol of Rumania, who'd be damned if he were going to ask the current Rumanian Government for a travel document. They wouldn't have given him one anyway, so he'd made his own, handwritten, with his family seal in wax and a photo affixed, saying he'd "bestowed" this passport upon himself. It had his full name, his date of birth, his marital status, etc., and pages he'd sewn together with thread, and stamps. After consulting with the Department, we gave him a visa, the only one I've ever delivered to somebody with a homemade passport.

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Q: But now you were the only consular officer. You were the head of that consular section. You were there in that separate building across the courtyard, I guess, from the Embassy in Tunis.

WILLETT: Exactly.

Q: That was considerable responsibility. There were all sorts of things that came through there. I suppose it was mostly visas, but you had your range of welfare cases, maybe some American drug cases —

WILLETT: Oh, yes.

Q: *What were the highlights on the consular side?*

WILLETT: Well, I remember one of them. There was a death, and I had to tell the woman, who was coming out of a coma, that her husband had died in their car accident. That was rough. I had to visit a lot of Americans in prison, once to inform a young druggie that his father had died. There was one guy named Ilonga, a Mozambican traveling on a Haitian passport, and he almost succeeded in conning me. He'd been staying at a fancy hotel in Tunis and run up a \$10,000 bill. For some reason I never understood, the United States looked after Haitian interests in Tunisia. What Haitian interests in Tunisia were I could not answer, but nonetheless, we were responsible. It turned out Ilonga had a history of gulling consular officers all over North Africa and southern Europe; he eventually went to jail. At one point I'd been foolhardy enough to lend him some money. Against all consular regulations, I locked up his passport in my safe and told him I wouldn't give it back until he returned the money he owed me. It wasn't the U.S. government that had made him a loan, it was Willett. And miraculously, he came up with the money. But he got into a lot of trouble with the Tunisian authorities.

Other times I simply helped traveling Americans resolve their less dramatic problems. Or every now and then there were trips that I helped coordinate, CODELS and whatnot. But

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I was still a young officer, on the sort of “grunt work” end of things. I wasn't involved in policy-making; that was reserved for the political and economic officers.

*Q: But as the head of your section, you would go to the country teameetings.*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: And hold up your end, report on what was going on.*

WILLETT: Yes. And under my tenure there, the place was physically revamped. Old files that had been kicking about for years were finally cleaned up. One of these files involved the Baron d'Erlanger and his American wife. He'd owned 50,000 olive trees that had been nationalized when the country became independent, and he had a gigantic compensation claim against the Tunisian government. One entire safe drawer was filled with thick files going back 15 years to 1956, Tunisian independence. Every consular officer who'd ever served in Tunisia since then had had to deal with this major problem, which I inherited. Well the baroness died, and one day Ramon Bertomeu, a wonderful old man, former Spanish Republican who'd fought Franco, fled Spain and wound up in Tunisia working in the consular section, where he'd been for 13 years, came into my office with this cubic foot and a half of files and dropped them in the wastebasket, saying to me, “Ainsi terminent tous les dossiers.” Q: In that embassy were there people who took any interest in consular affairs, if you got into a tough case you could consult with — the DCM, the Ambassador? You were pretty much out there on your own, I suppose.

WILLETT: Pretty much so, but of course, there were cases that I felt I had to call to the Ambassador's attention because U.S. interests were involved at a somewhat higher level than just, you know, another visa given or refused. After all, visa policy of the United States has always been pretty strict. When you turned a Tunisian down for a visa, you had to be prepared sometimes for a rough reaction, especially if the phone calls had been coming in to the Ambassador saying, “Look, this is my great aunt's second cousin's niece

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once removed, and if you don't give this visa, this is a personal affront against me, minister of A, B, or C, Mr. Ambassador." Then things got a little touchier.

*Q: Were these the years of the tremendous floods in Tunisia, when w brought in Sixth Fleet helicopters.*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: And was the consular section involved in that?*

WILLETT: Yes. There were many deaths. The wife of somebody in the American community was swept away when a oued overflowed and carried her car off a bridge. She and her husband were in the car. He was able to grab a tree branch and survived. I remember going through a similar situation in that storm in my Land Rover, on a mission somewhere or other, and not making it. I had to turn back. It was a terrifying scene. Roads I knew well had lost all familiarity. They were under these raging torrents, and at one point I think the only reason I wasn't swept away myself was because the Land Rover is a heavy car with a high wheel base; the water was able to move under it more easily. There were hundreds of deaths, and many farms were destroyed.

*Q: And it was Talcott Seelye who was able to talk the Sixth Fleet into coming in on fairly short notice, and that gained some favorable notice for the United States?*

WILLETT: Yes, we did help out the Tunisians with aid, which we gave with no strings attached. I think the formal AID program there was administered by Sumner Gerard, who'd sailed his boat over the Caribbean.

Talcott Seelye, under whom I served for only a year and a half, was one of the better ambassadors I ever worked for. He showed me that, while it's not always true, the Foreign Service has generally a meritorious system, that it does try to reward the best. It doesn't always succeed, that's for sure, but it tries.

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Q: Thinking of that, could you tell then that Frank Wisner was on his way to where he subsequently got in the Foreign Service when you observed him sur place?

WILLETT: No, I just liked Frank because he was — well, you know, everybody liked him. We enjoyed one another's company, did things together. His French wife Genevieve was already suffering ill health, and I thought Frank handled the situation with great elegance. The administrative officer was a guy named Richard Salazar, who got in trouble later on. The infamous Salazar case. But I liked most of the people I worked with there.

Q: Well, as our profile became higher there with the flood relief and an aid program, was it felt we were somehow in competition with the French? They, of course, regard Tunisia and North Africa as a *chasse gardée*. You were very much a francophone, a French speaker. How was it with the French?

WILLETT: The French were, of course, omnipresent, and certainly, they did regard the powerful presence of the United States as a threat to their perceived *chasse gardée* in the three big Maghrebien countries; but I never sensed that the United States was consciously out to supplant the French, never once. It just happens that we're a big country, and we're everywhere. We certainly weren't about to make an exception of Tunisia, that is to say, make ourselves invisible. There was a certain illogic to this French reaction. I would say, Dick, also, that it persists, to this day. I saw it again in Morocco when I was there. It's perhaps inevitable. When you'd speak with French diplomats, you could sense a certain wariness, you know. How forthright can I be with this guy? How is he going to use what I tell him to harm French interests here? Something like that. We used to joke about it sometimes, about the so-called competition, which from our point of view wasn't a competition at all, but was seen as such by the French.

Q: You talked earlier about Bourguiba's progressivism and the modernization and liberalization of Tunisia, but there was an undercurrent too of charges of corruption and

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the role, perhaps, of Mrs. Bourguiba, "Bibi," and I don't know who else. How was the entourage and the level of corruption there, vis # vis other posts you served in?

WILLETT: Well, you're quite right to make reference to Ouasilah and to Bibi. He was considered a hopeless poor second to his father, unworthy of assuming the reins of the country. Ouasilah had a lot of nicknames which I can't mention on this tape, and was seen as a thoroughly corrupt person. I would say she resembled Imelda Marcos a bit. She had so much money and seemed to have no real interest except in getting more. When you began exploring, you realized just how deep her interests lay. She seemed to have a finger in every major economic pie that the country was cutting up. I don't even know what happened to her. Is she still alive?

*Q: I believe both she and Bibi are, but I don't know.*

WILLETT: Bibi was very ill.

*Q: Yes, I knew that.*

WILLETT: I'm not sure what he had, diabetes or something. He wasn't really involved in politics, more a playboy, would-be businessman, exploiting his father's position to the hilt.

*Q: Well, John, before we leave Tunisia, is there anything we've missed and anything you want to say?*

WILLETT: I would only say that I left Tunisia with feelings of great fondness. As the ferryboat went north towards Marseilles, I thought I could see in the distance, probably my imagination, the white roofs of Sidi Bou Said. My heart was heavy, because I realized I was in a profession where you can get very attached to something then leave it, probably forever. It's not a coincidence that when I finally got married years later, my wife and I began our honeymoon in Tunis. I showed Chantal the house I'd lived in, the places I'd



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visited, and we drove through the country on a kind of nostalgic — for me — revisit of the country where, five years earlier, I'd served in my first real Foreign Service job.

Q: So you're working your way north. You started in Botswana. You got to Tunis. You're on your way by Ferry to Bordeaux, and a short time it looks like there, a year or so, and then on to Paris. So let's talk about Bordeaux first.

WILLETT: Well, that was planned, Dick. They had a system then whereby incoming young officers — I was no longer a junior officer because I'd been promoted — but young officers were encouraged to do something else first in France, a year in ENA or a consulate, before entering the Political Section in Paris for another 18 months or so. Something like that.

Q: *That makes great sense.*

WILLETT: It does make sense, because Paris is not France, despite the fact that Greater Paris has nearly 20 per cent of the French population. In Bordeaux I learned a lot about the way French politics works in the grassroots.

When I arrived in Bordeaux, William Dixon Boggs was Consul General and I was to serve as Consul. This was in January 1974, and it seemed to me that the eyes of all France were riveted on Bordeaux. Just sheer coincidence, but the reasons were threefold. In the first place, Chaban-Delmas was running for President of France against Giscard d'Estaing, so the papers were filled with news of Bordeaux, not only the local papers, but also the national papers.

Secondly, for the first time in recent memory, there was a scandal involving Bordeaux wines. Now we can laugh at this and call it “very French” or whatever, but it was no laughing matter in Bordeaux. One of the great Bordeaux vintner and trading families, a member of the Cruse family and of that closed society they call the Quai des Chartrons — going back to the 18th century, when Bordeaux was part of the “triangular trade” with the

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United States, the Caribbean and Africa — was found doctoring the wine. Tanker trucks of cheap wine from outside the Bordeaux appellation were trucked in at night and unloaded into vats. They were chaptalizing, they call it — I don't know the English for it — adding illegal sugars to the wine vats to raise the alcohol content. Things got so bad that the patriarch of the Cruse family committed suicide by jumping off a bridge into the Garonne. The scandal cost Bordeaux millions of dollars in good name, and exports to the United States plummeted. Americans stopped buying Bordeaux.

The third issue, a national one, involved the implantation of a nuclear power plant on the Garonne River. There were huge manifestations against this project. It was believed the plant would pollute the river, that it could even have an effect on ground water going into the vineyards; there were jokes about luminescent grapes the size of a grapefruit, etc. So for that one year, there I was in the second oldest consulate in U.S. diplomatic history...

*Q: The oldest being Tangier.*

WILLETT: Exactly, but Tangier was closed, so this was the oldest active consulate we had — and in a minute we can talk about what's happened in Bordeaux — but at any rate, I had my hands full.

In addition there was a mess in the consular section. The Consul General's secretary was a clearly deranged woman who'd been working there for years. No one had dared fire her.

*Q: American.*

WILLETT: No, she was French, but she had, I think, an LOU clearance, as locals sometimes do.

*Q: Sure.*

WILLETT: There was an ages-old backlog of cases, unresolved consular cases, safe drawers filled with them, and the Consul General had said to me when I arrived, "If

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you could do something about this situation, it would be a feather in your cap. As long as people can remember, nobody's ever surmounted this problem." You can see I'm heading towards braggadocio. I did get them all cleaned up, just taking file after file and determining what do we had to do with it. I drove the staff there — there were 11 locals in the consulate — I drove them crazy.

*Q: And how many Americans? WILLETT: Just me and the Consul General, that was it.*

*Q: So the workload was for both of you largely consular, or you were entirely consular and he was economic and political.*

WILLETT: No. I did political reporting and economic reporting as well. Hell, with a two man post like that, everybody does everything — sort of like Botswana, except that, unlike Botswana, Dixon Boggs — may he rest in peace — did write reports. He worked.

*Q: He was a working Consul General.*

WILLETT: He was a working Consul General, yes. His feet weren't just up on his desk. But he went away once, on home leave, and there I was alone for six weeks. He allotted his secretary to me; she used to drift in at 10 o'clock in the morning and drift out at 4 in the afternoon. One day I closed the door and took her to task, as a result of which she fainted. I wrote a report. I contacted Boggs on home leave and said, "Look, this can't go on. I have invited your secretary not to return to the consulate until you're back." Eventually she was fired. Overnight, the atmosphere in the consulate changed. You could sense a window had opened, letting in the spring.

*Q: He wasn't the strongest manager not to have taken that step before.*

WILLETT: I think he should have, though she performed, I guess, competently enough for him. But she had so poisoned her relations with everyone else that she'd become a detriment to the ability of the consulate to carry out its work. I think, in fact, that part of that

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backlog was due, indirectly, to her presence. Anyway, we got her out of there; a delightful woman replaced her.

The ten months passed. I lived pretty much on my own. There was a surprising amount of work, however. When I say to people that I had a year in Bordeaux, they kind snicker, but there was a lot of work, a lot of late nights. It wasn't as if you had crisis situations, but with the mayor of Bordeaux running for the presidency of France, there was a lot of reporting to do. I went out, just like a political officer, which I'd never really been, invited people to lunch and exchanged views with them on the political situation in Bordeaux. I remember going to see the conseiller g#n#ral, a kind of — what would you call him? — regional official. I remember seeing the pr#fet a couple of times in the Consul General's absence. It was the first time I really felt a sense of responsibility, that I had been given real responsibilities, and was important to me that I acquit myself well in the job.

By the time summer came around and Giscard won the election, I was packing my bags to move on to Paris. Bordeaux had sunk back into the kind of invisibility it had before I arrived. It seemed as if there was one little magic period of ten months when every eye had been riveted on Bordeaux, then it ended. The wine scandal ended, unhappily, but it ended. As regards the nuclear power plant, the French said, Dammit, you can protest all you want, but we're going to build it. So the year ended. My personal life there was very quiet and pleasant; I did a lot of horseback riding and swimming at the nearby beaches. I could drive out to the Atlantic coast, and it was sort of like Long Island, with endless expanses of broad, mostly empty beach good for running my dog. I led a quiet but rich life those ten months in Bordeaux. There again, I recall my stay there with great fondness.

Q: They say that for the past few decades power in Europe and France has been devolving to the subregional level, and it's trendy these days to talk about bananas that stretch up from Barcelona and pick up Bordeaux and go to Milan as being the power centers industrially of Europe, and central governments have less and less power. From the perspective of what you said on Bordeaux, how about that?

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WILLETT: I don't believe France has decentralized very much. I didn't see much evidence of it then, nor do I now. A *pr#fet* is still a *pr#fet*, and he's got a lot of power. In France, of course, you can have more than one mandate. You can be mayor. You can be a member of the National Assembly. I think you 're allowed to hold three different posts at once. Right now, Alain Jupp# is mayor of Bordeaux, having taken over the job after Chaban's 30 year stint, both of them having been Prime Minister of France at one point.

Q: Well, from the perspective of your stay there, if you in later years had been responsible for the Department management, would you have closed that post?

WILLETT: Yes.

Q: *That is to say, there were no real U.S. interests that you coulperceive?*

WILLETT: No. In part we were driven, very understandably, by nostalgia. I mean, it was a historic post. At one point, when we first talked about closing it, Chaban-Delmas dealt directly with U.S. senators whom he knew. He'd call them up on the phone and say, "Look, don't close this post." Of course, we not only closed Bordeaux, but Nice and Lyon to boot. Of those three, I think the most logical closing was Bordeaux. A number of American retirees lived there, and the Ford Motor Company had a plant outside town making automatic-shift gearboxes that were transported all over Europe; but our interests there were, and remain, limited.

Q: You don't feel, on the one hand, as you close all the consulates and you give quickie two week courses in leadership, that the Foreign Service officers rise up to DCM and ambassador with not the slightest managerial training, so one, it's training, and two, it is as you found before going to Paris, quite a different perspective than inside the beltway in whatever the capital city is.

WILLETT: Yes. It really is.

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*Q: In those respects it has some value.*

WILLETT: Yes. Oh, I'm not saying we should close all our consulates. It's just that if we're driven by budget concerns, if we're constrained to take a hard look at which consulates to keep open and which to close, and if inevitably we're going to close some, then Bordeaux rightly figured on that list. I'm sorry to say this. I know it's traitorous to my friends in Bordeaux, a couple of whom I've kept up with, but there's no way around it. The State Department did right to close the post.

*Q: So you were happy then to get to the big city, Paris, which you reached in December of '74.*

WILLETT: Right.

*Q: And then you went into the political reporting side.*

WILLETT: I went into the Political Section as a reporter on the majority conservative parties. The Political Section in Paris was huge. It's smaller now.

*Q: A dozen people then.*

WILLETT: More.

*Q: That's counting everybody.*

WILLETT: Oh, if you counted the secretaries, I think there were 21 people in the Political Section. Q: Goodness.

WILLETT: There was the political counselor, the deputy political counselor, the Middle East officer, the Latin America officer, the Asia officer. There was the internal unit, which in and of itself had four officers who did nothing but report on internal affairs. There was the social affairs office, run by John Condon, who later became Ambassador to Fiji. There was

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the political-military office, with two officers and a secretary. By the time you added all of those up, biographic officers and people like that, you had a solid 21 or 22 people. There are far fewer now; that I know. But somehow or other — what is it, the Peter Principle? — “Work expands to fill the occupation of the number of people available to do it.” Well, POL Paris was the living proof of this. We kept busy, reporting all the time on everything, too much reporting, much too much.

Q: Giscard had just been elected for another term. The conservatives were fairly entrenched. There was not a lot of uncertainty. Was there a concerned readership in Washington for your product? Were they saying, “Give us more, report on this, report on that”?

WILLETT: I don't think they were saying so much “Give us more” as “Tell us what this all means.” You know, it's easy to crank out telegrams every day on every burp and fart the political parties engage in. What's harder is to take the tendencies, the trends in the parties themselves, take the intraparty and interparty rivalries and try to make sense out of them, to extrapolate a prognosis for the future of the country. For example, do these fights on the right mean the conservatives will become so weakened that the left will win the next election? I remember well — this was the time Giscard was caught with the Bokassa diamonds.

Q: *I guess that's true, the Central African caper.*

WILLETT: Right, the Central African caper. I'd become a close friend with the editor-in-chief of the *Canard enchaîné*, the paper that broke the story. So I had a tremendous source to all the ins and outs and skullduggery of that scandal. But France is unlike the United States, where such a scandal might, I think, have occasioned another forced resignation in the White House. I mean, here's the head of state taking graft.

Q: *So he really did have it. It was an open and shut case.*

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WILLETT: Yes, but the French didn't care.

*Q: They didn't care. But how could he have been so stupid?*

WILLETT: Well, perhaps he just took it as a prerogative of office or something. He also had a crash in his private car, in which the French actress Mireille Darc was riding; he rammed a milk truck, and there was milk and broken glass all over Avenue Gabriel, right where the Embassy is, for heaven's sake. Giscard's people came along and had that cleaned up before you could say "Jack Robinson." Then, of course, there was the Mitterrand affaire, the phony assassination attempt up by the Observatoire. Mitterrand for years had let it be known that not only was he a valiant resistance fighter, but such an extraordinary man and such a threat to the right that they — whoever "they" are — tried to kill him. As the story goes, he was in a car, he jumped out, somebody fired a machine gun at him, or something like that. Nobody believed it for a second. They think he engineered this whole thing so he could appear a hero. The French are more philosophical about this kind of cynical manipulation than we are in America. Although people snickered and it made the *Canard enchaîné*, it didn't, as you can see, have any long-term deleterious effect on Mitterrand's career, because he was President of this country for 14 years.

*Q: So you were essentially a journalist in a big environment, a political reporter ferreting out the latest scandal within the conservative ranks and getting the inside story, trying to get it to Washington before the press.*

WILLETT: Well I made friends way back in the lower ranks of the conservative parties. Alain Juppé was a regular contact. In fact, when I returned to Paris on assignment in 1987 and found Juppé clearly destined for the highest ranks of elected political officialdom, I could still see him. There were a couple of ministers I could still see. In the Foreign Service you have to be careful about this. If you're a little twerp in the Political Section and you're frequenting people who should rightly be seen by the counselor or the Ambassador, then you have to be careful. You make a mistake — I won't even qualify it — by thinking, Oh,



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I'm going to rush out and see Alain Juppé and do a reporting cable that'll knock their socks off; because when the political counselor or the Ambassador sees that cable, he may not like it at all. He may feel constrained to send it, but he'll be suspicious of you from that point on. He might think you're trying to upstage them or something.

*Q: You mean to go forward in the Service, it's go along to gealong, keep your head down, that sort of thing?*

WILLETT: No. I don't at all mean keep your head down. I mean that in certain situations you should go to the political counselor if you're a younger officer and say, "Look, by dint of my connections formed years ago, I'm a friend of So-and-So. I'd like to have lunch with him. What do you think? Do you want to come along? How should we do this? Should I invite him in to call on the Ambassador first?" You've got to use your noggin, because if you don't things could backfire. People resent a mean and hungry look. I too might feel a little threatened, you know, if I were in the reverse position. So I handled those fortuitous acquaintances of mine carefully.

*Q: That's such a big embassy, I guess one of the biggest we have. Who were some of the people at the top of it, the Ambassador and so on, at that time?*

WILLETT: Let's see. One of the men, when I first arrived in Paris, was Ambassador Rush.

*Q: Kenneth Rush?*

WILLETT: Yes, Kenneth Rush. I thought he was a blowhard who didn't understand anything about France

*Q: He had been Deputy Secretary.*

WILLETT: Yes. He was IBM before that, no? I had no respect for him at all. I'm sorry, but I have to say it. Nor for the DCM in place when I got there. I didn't have much respect for him either. The whole Embassy called him "The White Mouse." But the political counselor

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Hank Cohen was a brilliant analyst and drafter, and a great boss. I recall him as one of the three or four superlative bosses of my career. I still see Hank when he comes through Paris.

Q: But they sound like fairly remote figures. That is to say, the people we were talking about in Tunis, they jumped right out. These were people whom, as a reporter in the Political Section, you didn't see every day. The Ambassador wasn't pulling you out to work with his visitors or that kind of thing all the time.

WILLETT: Well, we were active in the Internal Political Unit in proposing lunches. We would say, "You should host a lunch at the residence for the head of such-and-such a party and his four key deputies. We'll be good reporting officers, listen carefully and write you a crackerjack cable on that lunch." The Ambassador would be receptive to that.

Q: *John Irvin, were you there under his tenure?*

WILLETT: Briefly. John Irvin was approachable, decent.

Q: *Serious sort.*

WILLETT: Yes, Ambassador Irvin was a pleasant person to work for, kind and professional, but not distant. We could approach him. We could write him a short action memo to suggest an activity, and he would do everything he could to fit it in his schedule. We were invited to most of the receptions he held at the Residence, to lunches and dinners when it was appropriate. And of course there were the visits, by the Secretary or the President or a CODEL or political figures. Then the whole Embassy would be mobilized. It didn't matter whether you were third secretary or DCM, you were up to your neck in work and hands on tasking in preparation for, and during the execution of, whatever visit was taking place.

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*Q: This is a fairly frequent occurrence in Paris: Presidents and Secretaries, they're in and out. We're talking the Jimmy Carter years.*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: We're talking before the Iran hostage year.*

WILLETT: That's right. It was before the Iran hostage year.

*Q: The Secretary would be Cy Vance, no?*

WILLETT: Right. Cy Vance. He came through on a couple of occasions. That was the time, too, Dick, when one of the big problems between France and the United States was resolved, a residual debt from the time France kicked U.S. NATO forces out of France and they moved to Belgium. We were claiming \$125 million, if I remember correctly, and the French gave us \$25 million, what, 20 cents on the dollar? That accord was finally signed in a major ceremony at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, what they call the Quai d'Orsay, and I was present for that. Quite moving. We were a little bitter because we felt we were getting rooked, but I suppose we believed it was the best deal we could get. The whole gamut of Franco-American relations is a highly complex one, charged with emotion on both sides, charged with resentment. It goes on today. We can see it in virtually every major foreign policy issue. The French will want to distance themselves from the United States, to show their singularity. They have an expression for it, "l'exception fran#aise." Even when France agrees with the United States, this exception fran#aise sometimes emerges. De Gaulle's decision to have NATO moved out of France is an example.

*Q: In the scheme of things, those particular years, Giscard, JimmCarter or Cy Vance, wasn't Alain Jupp# the foreign minister?*

WILLETT: No. He was still a young whippersnapper.

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Q: Was the chemistry particularly good, bad? It wasn't the period of the more strident misunderstandings between the two countries in those years, was it?

WILLETT: Well, let's see. Vietnam was over, the secret talks having been conducted here in Paris. I came just after that. Of course, the French had no lessons to give us on Vietnam. There were foreign ministers in place who were as close to being outright anti-American as one could meet in this country. Take, for example, a man who served as foreign minister of France for barely a year, Michel Jobert (with an American wife, by the way). Jobert would be damned if he'd say yes to any American. He and Kissinger mixed it up, and in Jobert's memoirs he writes about showing up Henry 'the K', letting him know he couldn't push France around, etc. Much later I had a public dispute with Jobert, after he'd left the Foreign Ministry. He was giving occasional public talks, and still had a coterie of people who'd show up. He could draw a couple of hundred people into a room when he gave a talk, and I'd decided to attend one of them. This was during my second incarnation in Paris. I'll come to this later on. We had a most uncomfortable public exchange, in which I stood at a serious disadvantage because I was a first secretary on active duty and he was a retired foreign minister of the host country in which I was serving. He could treat me to *tous les noms de la terre* and I had more or less to take it on the chin; otherwise, I'd have been PNG'd.

Q: He, if I remember, was a Frenchman from Meknes in Morocco, who frequently wrote very favorable articles about Morocco and the King and maybe was on some sort of a retainer from the Moroccans.

WILLETT: While I was in Morocco on my last assignment, he would periodically blow in and out of the country. I believe he's a member of the Moroccan Academy.

Q: Yes, he is, along with Henry Kissinger, whom you mentioned.

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WILLETT: Along with Vernon Walters, and the former head of the French espionage service, Maranches, who died last year.

Q: You certainly came to Paris from two small, relatively, posts — Tunis and Botswana. How was the atmosphere, the morale, in this giant embassy? I get from what you're saying a feeling of some distance. The names don't jump out. Everybody was doing their own thing in their own subsection. Did you get a picture that there was some kind of a conductor bringing that orchestra together, something like 48, 49 different agencies of government housed in the embassy? Was it a real symphony or not?

WILLETT: From my perspective as a second secretary in the Political Section, I was ill placed to evaluate the overall management of the Embassy. If I'd been the DCM, or even the political counselor, I could answer that question better. But I did sense there was overall coordination. Mind you, my job, and those of my colleagues in the Internal Political Unit, was to be out meeting Frenchmen, and I did it with enthusiasm. My French was good. At the time I had a French girlfriend who later became my wife, Chantal, and I almost never saw Americans. I spent my life with the French, either on a professional or friendly basis. I was in the Embassy but in curious way not of it. I didn't like going to intraembassy dinner parties on Saturday night, seeing the same people I'd worked with all week. I didn't like taking Embassy-organized trips. I would come into the Embassy and do my job, but even then I was out a lot.

If you're not lunching with contacts two or three times a week, you're not doing your job. We were encouraged to produce at least a couple memcons a week. (Those were the days when people wrote memcons.) One of mine contributed to my getting a meritorious Honor Award. I went and saw René Andrieu, editor-in-chief of L'Humanité, the French Communist daily. I had to get permission to do so, because we had no official contact with the Communist Party. I managed to do a couple of reporting cables on that. As I later learned, Andrieu also had to get permission, from his Central Committee, to see somebody in the American Embassy. It was a lesson to me that you had to be careful

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how you handle these things. Do it by the book. Talk to people. Tell them what you're planning. I'd gone to a lecture he was giving, then I went up to him afterwards, handed him my card and said, "If I were to call you, do you think we could have lunch?" "Well," he replied, "I'd have to think about it." So I cleared it all through the Embassy, and once I had the Embassy's accord, I could get in touch with him.

I had a lot of journalist contacts, French journalist contacts. Paris is filled with discussion groups. I joined a few of them and even gave an occasional talk.

*Q: In French, of course.*

WILLETT: Yes. You remember I met Chantal because we were both members of the youth wing of L'Alliance atlantique, the Atlantic Alliance. The Embassy sent me down - this was Watergate time...

*Q: Ah yes, of course.*

WILLETT: ...they sent me to give a talk to this youth group about what Watergate meant, to a rather incredulous audience of young, sophisticated French people. I told them Richard Nixon had been forced to resign because if he hadn't he probably would have been impeached. He had violated U.S. law. It wasn't just a question of whether you liked him or not. And it was at this talk, on an island off Toulon — you can see how "rough" some of these assignments were — that I met Chantal. So I can say my marriage is a direct consequence of Watergate!

*Q: But in trying to explain Watergate, you met relativincomprehension from the French.*

WILLETT: Yes, total incomprehension.

*Q: And was that incomprehension any more or less unique than todain discussing the question of President Clinton?*

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WILLETT: Same thing.

*Q: Same incomprehension.*

WILLETT: Yes. Q: No more, no less.

WILLETT: No, same. To them, the Americans are still “big kids.” Les am#ricains sont des grands enfants. It's a clich#. I used to be offended by it. Now I have all sorts of replies. I've become a little more cynical, like the French, but I turn it back on them now. What they couldn't understand is how something they considered a peccadillo — eavesdropping on your political opponent — could get blown up into something that caused a President's downfall. They just didn't get it. And they don't understand today why the fact that a President is doing things with a young woman and then acting discreetly to, as they see it, protect her honor should bring such a merdier down on his head. I suspect they may believe U.S. politics are somehow cleaner than theirs. Many French fail to grasp how nasty it can get Stateside. I see little evolution on this between 1974 and now.

Q: Well, John, before we leave your first tour in Paris, anything we've missed, any particular things that stand out, accomplishments you're particularly proud of from that period, any particular things you would have done differently that somebody who hears this coming into the Service might benefit from?

WILLETT: I would say two things. One is that hard work, imagination and energy are rewarded. The other is that it's as important to be diplomatic with your colleagues as with your host country officials. Maybe more important, because you're going to be with your colleagues for the long haul, whereas with host country people, you've got your assignment there, but you may never be back. You have a little run-in, well, okay. This does not mean you should roll over and play dead, because, for me, that's the unfortunate tendency of many people in the diplomatic service. It always backfires.

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I remember a political counselor once coming into my office on my first assignment in Embassy Paris. I'd arrived early in the morning, as I often did. I had a ton of work, and the only person there besides me was the POLCOUNS (political counselor) secretary; I asked her if she could type a short action memo for me quickly, something that had to be on the Ambassador's desk at opening of business. She said, "Sure, be happy to." She was a good-natured lady, and the political counselor wasn't in yet. Later I was conducting a meeting of the Internal Political Unit. I think the guy who normally headed it was away, so there were only three of us. We were talking about the day's work when the door burst open and the political counselor stormed in. He tears into me for daring to have used his secretary without his accord. I just blew up right back at him; I said he had hell of a nerve humiliating me in front of my colleagues, that I wouldn't stand for it, that I was trying to do my job, and if this was the reward one gets for coming in early, the hell with him. He walked out, but later came back and apologized.

*Q: Good for you.*

WILLETT: I said to myself right then and there, That's it, that is the clearest lesson. And I think foreign entities, foreign governments sometimes have to be treated the same way. This doesn't work all the time, because when you're wrong, you're wrong. If you make a mistake and somebody comes in and chews you out, okay. But never humiliate someone out in front of other people. To me that's an automatic dictum. You can say, "May I see you afterwards?" Maybe everybody's going to realize that the person you've asked to see is in for it. Nonetheless, never do it in front of that person's colleagues. It's too damaging.

The behavior of CODELs, in Paris and elsewhere, also made a lasting impression on me, because frankly I was appalled by what I saw. One very powerful senator came here and the only thing that man wanted to do was go to nightclubs. He took eight or nine people, including me, to the Tour d'Argent and spent I don't know how many 1975 taxpayers' dollars on a dinner there. I found this disgusting, and I saw it time and time again. It seemed to me there should be some better oversight of the way elected officials



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spend money when they're abroad. Nobody dares do anything, and I didn't either. I deserve no credit for standing up to a senator and saying "Aren't you ashamed!" But I found it ultimately saddening to think there was such abuse of the people's trust, to use an appropriate cliché.

*Q: They all come through Paris.*

WILLETT: They all come through Paris. There were something in the neighborhood of 20/30 CODELs a year in town, and even if they had no business here, they'd orchestrate the trip so as to arrive on a Friday with one meeting, make sure there was a holiday on Monday and have their second and last meeting on Tuesday afternoon. So they could be here from Thursday evening to Wednesday morning and have two meetings. Of course the Ambassador, doing his job, would always feel constrained to have dinners for them and shepherd them around, and they would devour the time of two or three officers. Anyway, just thought I'd get that off my chest.

One of the most distasteful aspects of our Foreign Service careers is taking care of these visiting firemen, though every now and then, very rarely, there'd be a crackerjack CODEL. One of these involved arms control. Claiborne Pell and the then head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, a Rhodes Scholar, the names don't come to me. There were five of them in all, and they were good. I was proud to be with them. A couple of them spoke good French. On the other hand, one of our most respected senators came through and was inebriated half the time he spent here. He bullied the marines and blustered his way around with the French. It was embarrassing to be seen with him.

*Q: But, John, I'm thinking more about the diplomacy with colleagues. I've never been myself in a political section and I can't imagine it of a total of 20. I can't imagine ambitious young middle grade officers trying to get ahead. There must have been some sharp elbows and competing for scraps. How did that work out, and when you were the acting*

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head of the internal section, how did you keep the boys apart and preserve the, kind of, good working relations?

WILLETT: There it was pretty easy because the jobs were defined in a way that made it difficult to transgress. Admittedly, I said previously I was doing the majority conservative parties, then all of a sudden I'm dealing with the editor-in-chief of Humanit#? Why is it me that brings him into the Embassy? That was a target of opportunity; I'd attended his talk simply to hear the man, and wasn't intending to identify myself. I made that decision on the spur of the moment. Having gone that far, though, I carefully shepherded the deal through the Embassy, as I mentioned, including, first and foremost, the young man responsible for the opposition parties. He did resent it a bit, as I might have in his place. But the categories of work were clearly defined. If you're doing Asia, you probably won't get involved in domestic politics. If you're doing the Middle East, you probably won't get involved in Latin America. Spillover did occur, Dick — and your question is well placed in that respect — on the political-military side of things. The very definition of the job, political-military, means that it's both military and political. We were stepping on one another's toes all the time. And not only was political-military stepping on political's toes, or vice versa, but on the military's toes as well. John Kelly was political-military officer in Paris when I was there, and before him there was a very strange man who later murdered his wife and committed suicide.

*Q: In Paris.*

WILLETT: No, back in the States. It was a famous case. We don't have many FSO's who do that.

*Q: I remember that, I remember.*

WILLETT: In fact, this event occurred not too distant from the time when the former French ambassador to the Vatican killed his wife and four children and then committed suicide.

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Marital problems and alcoholism run high in diplomacy. Too much easy alcohol lying around.

*Q: How were relations as a reporting officer between the reporting officers and the Station?*

WILLETT: Tense at times, but I, for one, always remained convinced, and did so through the time I was acting DCM and briefly chargé d'affaires in Morocco, that the only people who stand to gain when tensions arise between pol and the station are the people who don't have U.S. interests at heart. I would go out of my way to work with the Station, when appropriate, even on a couple of rare occasions sharing contacts with them. I wouldn't let them take my contacts unless they needed to get at someone else through one of mine. Then I'd ask: "Is this what you're planning to do; let's see if this is workable," or whatever.

*Q: You mentioned the DCM. That wasn't Chris Chapman and the celebrated incident he thought was an attempt on his life?*

WILLETT: No. I arrived after that.

*Q: Okay. So you weren't particularly constrained at that time by terrorist threats, menaces and so on, security.*

WILLETT: I never felt it. I lived on Ile Saint Louis. I didn't have car, but I did have a dog, which I took to the Embassy. I walked him the two miles from Ile Saint Louis to the Embassy every day, and no matter what time I got out of work, I walked home at night. This kept me in good shape. The ambassadors were understanding about the dog, which slept on a chair in my office. The political counselor was less thrilled, but I pointed out to him that Giscard kept his two retrievers in his office. "Yes, but he's the president of France," he answered, "and you're a second secretary," which was a pretty good response. Anyway, it all worked out.

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Q: John, before we leave France, the whole aspect of the impact of U.S. culture and embassies as a platform for cultural projection and understanding — have you any thoughts on that?

WILLETT: I've always believed that the cultural section of a post is as important as any other section. Every time one steps out of the embassy, one is, in effect, acting as a cultural ambassador for one's country. I enjoyed going to the cultural events. I readily agreed to speak a few times. I traveled to universities in France and spoke on American topics. I did have a slight advantage over some of my colleagues, because I'd majored in French literature at Kenyon and was therefore able to talk to the French perhaps a bit more on their own terms. But this said, the Political Section in Paris, where I worked, had a number of excellent French speakers. It is incorrect to say that Americans are monoglots; they're not. There were proficient French speakers working in the section with me. One of them was Chuck Redman, who followed the left. We stayed friends until he left the Foreign Service after completing a tour as ambassador to the FRG. In fact, my family and I went up to visit him and his wife Eileen when he was ambassador to Sweden. We stayed there ten days, hiking with him and his family. But back to your question; staying involved in the culture of the country one's serving in, speaking the language of the country, incrementally increases one's ability to do his or her job well.

Q: But in a country as culturally aware as France, whether it's James Baldwin or Michael Jackson or Ernest Hemingway or Gertrude Stein, the U.S. influence is flowing in all around an embassy. Can an embassy really play a role in that? It seems to me the influence is so much more pervasive than anything the embassy can purvey.

WILLETT: You're absolutely right. The influence of American popular culture is all embracing and has, in fact, reached a point in this country where the authorities are now limiting the number of American films on TV. The GOF has also imposed tariffs on the

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importation of American movies, which doesn't stop people from paying \$10 a ticket to go see, you know, totally idiotic things like *Lost in Space*.

Still, there's another side to American culture, less popular, which the Cultural Section has a role in bringing into France, Spain, Germany, Italy — whatever. Poets, artists, writers who are not so well known by foreign publics are sponsored by USIS. It's true that William Styron is a well known abroad, so when he came to France there was a ready-made audience for him. But there are others. William Gass, for example, is less well known. I shepherded him about when he came to Strasbourg. I learned a lot; the French learned a lot. It was stimulating to watch him entrance a French audience even though he didn't speak French. I would end this by repeating that it's a mistake for Foreign Service officers to ignore the cultural side of their job, a real mistake. First of all, foreigners are understandably flattered when you evince knowledge of, and appreciation for, their culture. As a result, they're more inclined to learn about the better aspects of your culture. You're right; American popular culture is omnipresent. But there's another side to things in America that deserve knowing, and that's where USIS plays an important role.

Q: Feeling as strongly as you do about cultural outreach, are you reassured or concerned by the recent complete merger of USIA and the State Department?

WILLETT: I would say it's not a bad thing. Why not amalgamate them? Each one can influence the other in beneficial ways. What I certainly hope is that this doesn't make USIS a less powerful presence in embassies; that would be a mistake.

Q: Well, John, you had friends in personnel or were on some sort of a roll. You went from one extremely desirable post, Paris, to another, New York. It looks as if you had a home leave perhaps in between. How was that transition?

WILLETT: Well, the home leave... I have to confess that I broke a Foreign Service rule here, because I didn't return to the States. Rather than using my home leave to be re-acclimatized, I extended it to take leave without pay and went on a three month

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honeymoon with Chantal. We drove from Tunis to Mombasa and had a wild, adventurous time. Every time I got to an embassy, I'd send a telegram off to USUN saying, "Don't worry, I'm coming, I'm on my way, we're okay, hang in there, I haven't forgotten I've been assigned to USUN." I finally arrived in New York. Andy Young was permanent representative, and the deputy permanent representative was a wonderful FSO.

*Q: Don McHenry?*

WILLETT: No. It was Jim Leonard, and I greatly enjoyed working for both him and Young. Suddenly I was up there in the stratosphere. It's one of those things that can happen in the Foreign Service. You go plodding along, then next minute you're walking down the street with Andy Young.

*Q: Andy Young's USUN was a pretty heady place.*

WILLETT: It sure was. Well, you were there, so you know.

Q: No, I overlapped with you only in '80, when Don McHenry was there. I wasn't there in the Andy Young time, so I'm anxious to hear about it.

WILLETT: My first year was spent as kind of a directeur de cabinet. I don't know what we would call that.

*Q: Chief of staff.*

WILLETT: Chief of staff, to Jim Leonard. He's a wonderful man, educated, cultured, a linguist of the highest order. He speaks fluent Russian, good Chinese, good French, and he had a gently ironic way of carrying out business that appealed to me tremendously. And the deputy perm rep position in New York is a powerful one. Once he jumped on me for something or other, I forget what, and later in the day came in to my office and said, "John, sorry I was irritable. I had no cause to talk to you that way. I apologize." Well, I

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would have walked the plank for Jim Leonard, and I still remember him as one of the finest men I worked for in the Foreign Service.

Andrew Young, of course, I had less contact with, though still a fair amount, mainly because of my French. Whenever there was anything in French, I was there. One of the interesting things about the foreign service is that by dint of speaking a language, you can go from the superficial to the substantive. You start off as just an interpreter and notetaker, and one day you're suggesting ideas, making policy proposals. You've written this memo; you see there's an opening to advance the solution to a problem, and you suggest it. Gradually people begin to think of you not only in terms of a scrivener, but as somebody who's part of the team, who has ideas. I went along on a number of meetings with Andy Young. And the Iran hostage crisis took place while I was at USUN.

Q: But you came along, it seems to me, just after a sea change in U.S. policy. That is, we'd had the Nixon/Ford years, Carter arrived in '76, Andrew Young was the first Afro-American UN ambassador, it was a maximum outreach to the United Nations, focused particularly on African developments and establishing a rapport with the 50 African countries. You being in the Political Section and the chef de cabinet of Leonard, were right in the middle of that.

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: Andrew Young was extremely embraced by the Third World majority in the UN at that time, no?*

WILLETT: By everybody, not only the Third World majority; because people knew that Young had been standing beside Martin Luther King when he was shot, that he'd cradled the dying King's head in his lap. Young had walked the extra mile, and when he came into a room, there was an aura about him, the aura of a historical figure. I was in the Security Council just after he'd been fired.

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*Q: This was a very important moment.*

WILLETT: Abram Terzi, the PLO representative, said, "Andy, this is not adieu; this is just au revoir." That was his sentence, using those French words. I thought, What am I hearing? The PLO representative is saying to the recently fired American permanent representative, let's hope this is not adieu. I couldn't believe it. I'd walk down the street with Andy Young, and kids would come up to him and say, "Hey, Andy. You're Andy Young. Give me your autograph." Or the mayor's office might call, or he'd go have lunch with a head of state.

*Q: He himself was personally modest, it seems to me, in what little exposure I've had to him, or not?*

WILLETT: Yes, he was. Let's just say he was entirely secure in his position, a man who didn't have to prove himself. He was relaxed, whereas so many people in the Foreign Service are not. They feel the need to posture and pose. Now mind you, we can't all be Andy Youngs.

*Q: Demanding of you and the staff around him?*

WILLETT: Yes, but in the best way. A very humane person. The ambience on the 10th floor at USUN was exciting. You couldn't walk in the door without feeling the vibes. After all, there were five ambassadors working like dogs in that building, five people with ambassadorial rank. Nobody was a slacker.

*Q: Bill Vanden Heuvel was there?*

WILLETT: That was later. But for me Bill Vanden Heuvel was not Jim Leonard. Jim Leonard would bicycle to work. He'd be there at eight in the morning. Sometimes at midnight or one o'clock he'd call his wife and say, "There's no point in my coming home,



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because at six o'clock in the morning such and such is going to happen and I've got to be here." Then he'd collapse on his couch.

*Q: And so, John, before Andy Young's resignation, termination, yohad maybe two years there working with his team.*

WILLETT: Something like thaMaybe a bit less.

*Q: And in that time, what did you perceive to be his focus? He was traveling a good deal to Africa and elsewhere on the Rhodesia business. Perhaps you traveled with him.*

WILLETT: No, I didn't travel with him. On occasion I went out with him in New York, but I didn't travel with him. His focus, a lot of it, was on Third World issues generally, African issues in particular. I was with Jim Leonard for only about 10 months. Then they moved me into the Political Section, and said, in essence, "You create a job for yourself down there. You've got an office; we're going to give you half a secretary, or a third of a secretary, and certain things need to be done." They didn't give me carte blanche.

*Q: Why the move, for starters? You were obviously doing well withim.*

WILLETT: Oh, it was planned that way.

*Q: You didn't want to be a staffer for the whole tour.*

WILLETT: No, I didn't. Never staffed before, never since. It was only Jim Leonard that kept me in the job for ten months, because I would have asked to be moved out it had been somebody I didn't like.

*Q: Okay. So you went downstairs. Dick Gleysteen was politicacounselor.*

WILLETT: I can't recall the exact order here. First Gleysteen, think, then B.J. Jones. Dick Petrie was in there somewhere.

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*Q: Ah, Dick Petrie. Wonderful guy, in my judgment. I like Dick. But he wasn't one of the ambassadors, or was by the time I got there?*

WILLETT: I'm not certain. At any rate, the head of the Political Section for a while was a woman named B. J. Jones.

*Q: Oh, that was before my time.*

WILLETT: I had big problems with her, an antagonistic relationship, because of something she'd once said upon reading a comment I'd appended to one of my cables.

*Q: Had she been in Athens, Greece, as the political counselor?*

WILLETT: I think so. Q: Yes. Rather cautious and, hmm, yes.

WILLETT: You're being very diplomatic with your "rather cautious." I was standing in her office and she handed me back my draft cable saying, "Delete the comment." I responded, "Delete the comment? But that's the essence of our job. Anybody can slop the facts down on a page and fire it off." "You're not here," she remarked, "for your comments. Your comment is not needed. It is not wanted. It is not appreciated. I'll decide if a comment goes on here. You're a reporting officer. You just put the facts down."

It was over between us. I lost all respect for her, and indeed, I spent much of the time she remained at USUN arguing with her on policy issues. I thought she was a dangerous person for U.S. foreign policy, overly cautious, a real apparatchik. I thought she was exactly the kind of senior Foreign Service officer that could destroy younger officers by influencing them in the wrong way, to be overly cautious, cowardly, whatever.

*Q: As you've described her and as you've described Andy Young, they would not necessarily have been on the same wavelength. How was that?*

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WILLETT: I think Andy Young was too much a gentleman to do anything about her. And the reporting produced in the Political Section was doing the job. The required reporting got out in a timely manner. I won't slight Jones on that score. But it was a slave ship under her auspices. I mean, you arrived there early every morning with the phones already ringing off the hook, and you got home every night at nine o'clock, ten o'clock, eleven o'clock. Those sessions in the Security Council might be called any time. They could end at any hour. You never knew. You'd planned a weekend and, you know, there'd be an emergency session of the Security Council, called by the PLO, for some Israeli infraction.

*Q: As you structured, then, your job in the Political Section, what portfolios did you carve out?*

WILLETT: Well, first I got involved in Western Sahara, which was then a big issue in the UN.

*Q: And now.*

WILLETT: Yes, and now. I just read in the newspaper that the referendum is coming up. I'll believe it when I see it. I also dealt with the Kampuchea seat question, a nasty piece of work. If I may, Dick, I'll talk for a minute about this. Maybe the best thing is to review the facts. Jimmy Carter was elected on a platform of human rights in both foreign and domestic policy; human rights was one of his bedrock themes, supported, strongly supported, by Andy Young and Jim Leonard and Cy Vance, by the entire Administration. Then there was a change, as you know, at USUN.

*Q: What you're saying, before you go further, is a little bit that Jimmy Carter would have owed Andy Young one, that they go back clearly a long way together in Georgia, that Andy Young could write his own ticket.*

WILLETT: Andy Young could more or less write his own ticket. You're right. Except it wasn't a totally blank ticket.

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*Q: This was just as preface to what you'll later tell about the circumstances.*

WILLETT: Well, it's germane to the Kampuchea question.

*Q: Yes, okay.*

WILLETT: In fact, it's a part of the Kampuchea question. You know that we were strictly forbidden, as U.S. diplomats, from any formal contact with the PLO. It was a matter of U.S. policy. Well, at that time, in 1980, you couldn't help running into the PLO. I mean, you'd walk through the corridors of the UN, and they'd be there. So you'd nod and say hello, or something.

*Q: I remember that bald Mr. Terzi. He was sitting everywhere.*

WILLETT: Right. Very good diplomat, Mr. Terzi, very able diplomat. It's not for nothing he was kept 15 years in New York, or whatever.

*Q: That's right.*

WILLETT: Well, Andy Young had a meeting with Abram Terzi at the home of the Kuwaiti perm rep, who'd set it up. I have no hard facts to back me up on this, but what everybody says is that the Mossad had bugged the apartment of the Kuwaiti perm rep, as it bugged the apartment of every Arab perm rep in New York. Whether this is true or not, I don't know, but that's what was said.

*Q: I think it's now a matter of public record that the account of what Andy Young said to the PLO was recorded by the Israelis.*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: Well, that's in a variety of documents that have become public. I think it's generally accepted as the case.*

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WILLETT: You know more than I do. At any rate, those tapes, or whatever, were turned over to Cy Vance. Q: But how did the meeting happen to occur in the first place. That is, Andy Young knew perfectly well the standing policy. Why did he decide to go against it? Even though the Kuwaitis were the intermediaries, he knew what it was about.

WILLETT: You know I'm not sure, but I believe that — perhaps you can say something on this yourself, Dick — I believe Young was convinced he could effect a breakthrough in the peace process.

Q: I see. And that in stepping out of the policy his relationships were good enough, close enough that he could carry his weight in doing that.

WILLETT: He may have thought that way, but I don't want to speak for Ambassador Young. I won't pretend to know what went on in his head. But that would be a logical thing to surmise.

Q: *I see.*

WILLETT: Then the (now open) story, I guess: the tapes were turned over to Cy Vance, who was caught between a rock and a hard place. He had no choice but to inform Carter. As I heard it, Vance said something like, "I think the world of Andy Young, but we have no recourse. We have to fire him. I don't want to do it, but if you don't fire him, then you've got to fire me. Somebody's got to go, because this is too serious." Mind you, in New York, I gave a dinner. April was there, April Glaspie, and Edward Said, at that time a member of the Palestinian National Council.

Q: Taking one thing at a time, I think from documents that have come out, it's the case, or it's said to be the case, that Andy Young, in first explaining his meeting, said to Cy Vance or whoever questioned him, either that there had been no meeting or that there had been no substantive discussion, and the tapes indicated that what he said had not been

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the complete truth, and that at that point they felt there was no choice but to accept his resignation.

WILLETT: You've got a better handle on the story than I do. At an rate, one day Andy Young left.

*Q: And what was the reaction in the mission and in the UN at large?*

WILLETT: Oh, we were devastated. We all admired him. I couldn't believe it.

*Q: Gloom and doom.*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: And you would go across the street to the Delegates' Lounge and what kind of conversations did you have?*

WILLETT: Well...

*Q: If people pigeonholed you to say, what is this about?*

WILLETT: That's what the UN is about, pigeonholing. There wasn't really much to say, you know. We had a policy. The policy was known. A cabinet official had broken that policy and paid for it with his job. A straightforward, open-and-shut case, and I'm certain some of the canner diplomats at the UN understood things, the way an Albanian would. They, the Albanians, had an injunction against even talking with USUN diplomats, so they could, I suppose, comprehend an injunction for us not to talk to the PLO.

*Q: Comprehend and, in some quarters, gloat?*

WILLETT: Andy Young was well liked personally; many people must have been sad to see such an approachable U.S. official leave the scene. That said, anything embarrassing to

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the United States was music to the ears of a country like the GDR. So, sure, they were glad.

Anyway, to cut this segment short, to get on to why I raised it, Andy Young left the UN, and overnight there was sadness and a sea change in the mood at USUN. Don McHenry, an entirely different kettle of fish from Andrew Young, took over. He was also a wheeler and a dealer, less of a visionary, more of a political animal. That's not to say Andy Young was not a political animal, but he was a nice political animal.

Q: But Andy was a purely political animal, and Don was semicareer officer. He had been an FSO and then left for a period, so he combined the two dimensions.

WILLETT: He combined the two dimensions, but not in a particularly felicitous way, as far as I'm concerned. I remember walking through the UN halls with Andy Young one time. Young, McHenry and me. And as usual, the cameras were all over Young.

Q: *Why do you say "as usual"?*

WILLETT: Because he had this aura to him. As Andy was walking forward, he'd said something to me. I had replied okay and stepped back to take a couple of notes. Immediately, Don McHenry shot up, when he saw the cameras were there, looped his arm through Young's, leaned over as if Young were relying on him for the most critical counsel a man could possibly give. And for the entire walkthrough, with these cameras aimed at them, McHenry used the moment to further his own career. That sums it up.

Q: *He was — is it what you're saying? — now and then ambitious for that perm rep seat even before, or before the Young resignation.*

WILLETT: I would think so.

Q: *It seemed apparent to you, being there.*

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WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: I see.*

WILLETT: Yes, I mean we all sometimes have strong ambitions, but McHenry, it seemed to me, was out there solely for McHenry.

*Q: So Andy was suddenly gone, and you were in a period of uncertainty in the mission, who was going to be the head, what are going to be the changes, what does this mean? Then how long did that last, and how did it work itself out?*

WILLETT: USUN is not a post the White House leaves vacant very long, not if it can be helped. McHenry, who was already on the scene, was a kind of natural.

*Q: It's been vacant now for months, since Madeline Albright came to Washington.*

WILLETT: Yes, right. Well, that's an indication of the evolution of our feelings towards the UN. You're right to catch me up on that, Dick. But ordinarily we don't leave it vacant, we didn't used to leave it vacant, for very long.

*Q: So you were in a short interregnum.*

WILLETT: In a short interregnum, where Jim Leonard took over, and like a true professional, handled everything beautifully. Jim was liked and respected by everybody, and so there was no problem there.

*Q: He and Don McHenry worked well together?*

WILLETT: Yes, I guess so. I can't pretend to know for certain. If not, it didn't show in public. They were certainly two different men. Jim Leonard you'd see at an obscure exhibit in some corner of the Met, alone on a Sunday morning, looking at Mesopotamian artifacts,



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whereas Don McHenry - God knows what he'd be doing Sunday morning, but it wouldn't be viewing Mesopotamian art.

Anyway, Don McHenry was named Perm Rep. I don't have the sequence of events clear in my mind here, but I know that Jim Leonard drifted out, and Vanden Heuvel drifted in, and B. J. Jones left, and Petrie came, and there were all these changes...

Q: Was it not the case that there was a very high profile Soviet ballerina defection, and that Don McHenry was catapulted onto national television for camping out at the Kennedy Airport for 24 hours, 48 hours, and then...

WILLETT: To make sure she wasn't kidnapped.

Q: To make sure she wasn't kidnapped by the Soviets, and that was a nationally televised incident, and his good handling of that in the eyes of the public reinforced his then promotion to perm rep.

WILLETT: Yes, but I think his chances of being promoted to perm rep were already good. That incident only reinforced them. He was well placed. He was a minority. He had foreign service experience, and USUN experience. In short, a natural.

*Q: And he had no involvement or taint in the PLO meeting, in setting it up, in being there, in anything else - distanced from that...*

WILLETT: To my knowledge, no. And in view of his unfailing courtesy, Young doubtless said to himself beforehand, I'm not going to get anybody else in trouble. I'm taking a risk. I'll do this on my own. But there was a total change in mood and atmosphere, in the way things were handled. Suddenly the 10th floor permanent representative's office became a very distant place indeed.

Q: As you've had Andy doing that, it's with a certain amount of reverence that you speak. Was it in your thoughts and the others in the mission, that this was a courageous gamble

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on his part that might have impacted on the world situation and that he might have carried it off, or did you see it as a damn fool thing to do?

WILLETT: Dick, I once sent a Dissent Channel message, before we ever engaged in talks with the PLO, entitled "Why Not Talk with the PLO?" It was badly received in Washington.

*Q: By the NEA Bureau.*

WILLETT: Well, those Dissent Channel messages go right up to the Secretary, then back down for comment. I thought our policy was crazy, not to talk to the PLO. I didn't understand how you gained by not talking with somebody. Nor am I sure even today, as I approach my dotage, that I understand the benefits from refusing to communicate; however, it's a policy. It still exists in certain cases. We refuse to see a Serb bandit chieftain on the grounds that through such an occurrence, he might be empowered. But you don't have to send the Secretary of State to talk with him. If you send a third secretary, what's the problem? Anyway...

*Q: But there was, in answer to it, then, a certain amount of respect your level in the Political Section for what Andy Young did.*

WILLETT: For a gutsy move. Well, in my eyes, anyway. I won't pretend to speak for my colleagues, but those were my sentiments. April was there, a fairly cautious gal.

Q: April Glaspie, later very well known as the ambassador in Iraq at the time of Saddam Hussein going into Kuwait, at that time, the Political Section officer in charge of the Middle East.

WILLETT: Right. I should have made that clear. Anyway, April was cautious person.

*Q: I sound like Jim Lehrer, saying these things.*

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WILLETT: Right. Well, to cut to the quick here, there was a major policy question at the UN at the time: who should represent Kampuchea, as Cambodia was then called, in the UN? What happened? We lost the war in Vietnam. In Kampuchea, in 1975, Pol Pot took over. We all know what happened there. It was one of the most heinous actions of the 20th century, and I say that full knowing what the references are. In 1978, the Vietnamese invaded Kampuchea and ultimately overthrew the Pol Pot regime, which became a rebel group in the jungle fighting the government in Phnom Penh. There is still Khmer Rouge leaders in hiding, though most of the officers and virtually all the troops have surrendered.

So the question was whether we were to allow a representative of the Pol Pot regime to occupy the Kampuchea seat in the UN. That's one question. Had U.S. policy been that the Pol Pot regime should not sit in Kampuchea's chair because it was an unspeakable regime, that's another question. But U.S. policy refused to sanction the overthrow of any government by our enemy, Vietnam; therefore, we were instinctively opposed to allowing somebody to supplant the Kampuchean Pol Pot representative, because that would appear to condone Vietnam's invasion of Kampuchea and overthrow of an extant regime, however repulsive. Therefore, we and the ASEAN states — at that time they numbered five: Malaysia, Thailand, Philippines, Singapore and Indonesia — supported the seating of the Pol Pot representative. I found this so unthinkable, especially with Jimmy Carter sitting in the White House and Cy Vance as Secretary of State, that I wrote a simple Dissent Channel message, with a single, straightforward argument: this is inconsistent with national and international U.S. policy. We should not allow any representative of the government sitting in Phnom Penh to occupy the seat, but leave it vacant until a government that accords with our human rights policy is in place in Phnom Penh. I crafted this cable and showed it to Don McHenry, then to B. J. Jones and the two legal advisers.

*Q: Rosenstock and Reese.*

WILLETT: Herb Reese and Bob Rosenstock — Reese und Rosenstock. It became a real debate. There were a number of meetings. McHenry would lick his finger and hold it up to

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catch the way the wind was blowing. B. J. Jones was adamantly opposed to my initiative, as was Bob Rosenstock. Herb Reese was in favor. A couple of other officers were in favor. Finally, I recrafted the cable to try to meet certain 11th floor exigencies, because I was then hoping to send it out as front channel policy. I repeat: the Administration's stance was inconsistent with its own policy.

Ultimately, there was a late night meeting in the office of the legal adviser. McHenry was there, Reese was there, Rosenstock, B. J. Jones, everybody else.

*Q: You were there yourself.*

WILLETT: Yes. McHenry said, "Why don't we call in, why don't we telephone this philosophy, this proposal, to the Department?" I said, "No, that's not the way you modify a major U.S. position." I didn't say it that way. I said it respectfully. Well, the cable ultimately went out as a Dissent Channel message signed by me and a few other people, including Reese. There was a stony silence. Holbrooke was Assistant Secretary for EAP.

*Q: For East Asia and Pacific.*

WILLETT: Right. The silence was deafening for two weeks, and finally a convolutedly argued, Kafkaesque response came back as to why we couldn't change our policy. I don't know whether what I'm about to tell you is true, but I heard that Vance read my cable, that somebody said, "This cable is well argued." It wasn't that long (they can't be, or the Secretary won't read them). Reportedly he commented, as I heard the story — I don't know whether it's true — "This makes sense to me. Call up Dick Holbrooke." So Holbrooke arrived and Vance apparently said to him, "Look, I don't know who this guy is, but it makes good sense to me. It's consistent with our human rights policy, etc. Why can't we do this? Just keep the seat vacant." And Holbrooke replied, "Oh, our ASEAN friends and, and other people — China. China is against this, because of its enmity towards Vietnam. We just can't do it." And the Secretary said, "No, you haven't convinced me." So — I repeat, I heard this, and I don't know whether it's true — Holbrooke returned with advisers, and they

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finally convinced the Secretary that, no, it couldn't be done. I got this cable back. When I later met Holbrooke at USUN for the first time, the encounter was frosty. But I'm glad I wrote it. I've never regretted it. I didn't get any reward for creative dissent, I can tell you that. But I don't care, because I did the right thing.

I should add that the single act in my Foreign Service career of which I'm deeply ashamed also took place during my stint in NYC. Something I've regretted to this day. We were President that month of the Security Council. The Pol Pot rep wanted to see us, not as the USG, but as President of the Security Council, and that was legal, even mandatory in such a capacity. The UNSC President has to receive anyone who asks. I remembered the photograph of P#tain and Hitler, the famous handshake, and I said to myself, You must not do this. It's not a public event, it's private, which morally makes it even more important that you not shake the man's hand. But when the Pol Pot rep walked into the room, my bourgeois breeding made me stick my mitt out. I shook his hand, having repeated to myself as I walked into the room, Don't do it, don't do it. He put his hand out and I shook. To this day I regret it, and I think about it...

Q: To just round out on Kampuchea, you discussed the dissent debate within the mission, but how did it play out in the UN itself? That was a General Assembly rather than Security Council issue?

WILLETT: Right. It was a General Assembly decision, made in the GA's Credentials Committee. The decision was taken by the Carter administration to vote with its ASEAN partners in favor of seating the Pol Pot rep in the Kampuchea seat at the UN. But it was a strange set of bedfellows, with the Russians trying to oust him and the Chinese supporting him and we supporting the Chinese.

Q: If we could just circle back, you spoke yesterday at length on the circumstances of Andy Young's resignation for contacts with the PLO, but you also mentioned that you

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yourself had some contacts, a dinner, I think you said. How did that play out? Wasn't that a contradiction?

WILLETT: I think it was a contradiction. I, of course, vetted the dinner ahead of time. I had met Said somewhere, at a cultural event, I can't remember quite. He's a well-known scholar.

*Q: A professor at Yale.*

WILLETT: He's written a number of books, the most famous being, I believe, Orientalism, which came close to being a bestseller in the United States. He's a smart guy, most interesting. I got to chatting with him on some occasion and asked the powers that be in the mission if I could invite him over for dinner. I think the request went down to Washington and they must have decided, "Well, since it's at that lowly Willett level we can let him do it." I invited a few other people at the mission, and they too cleared it upwards. We had a quiet dinner at my home on Grove Street in the West Village. He was the only PLO rep present, but there were other Middle Eastern types.

Q: Where are we in the process? That is, Andy Young had been bounced for doing just that. Bob Pelletreau in Tunis was already or not yet an official channel to the PLO?

WILLETT: I can't remember, Dick. I can't even remember when this dinner took place.

*Q: You were out there as one of the early contacts, it seems to me.*

WILLETT: Perhaps, but it was definitely after Andy Young's departure, because I was living in the home of his key adviser, Stoney Cooks. It must have been late 1979, something like that. Maybe early 1980.

WILLETT: I think by then an official dialogue had opened in Tunis.

WILLETT: That could very well be.

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*Q: But they were quite restrictive on no contacts outside of that.*

WILLETT: Yes. Q: So you had carefully prepared talking points from Washington?

WILLETT: Actually, I had no prepared talking points, because they didn't want me to engage in any kind of a substantive dialogue. They forbade me from so doing because it was feared Mr. Said might interpret certain remarks as a policy move on our part. So the conversation remained as much literary and cultural as it was political. A fun evening.

*Q: It's curious to me that they allowed it.*

WILLETT: For me too. I thought for sure they'd refuse.

Q: And in line with your wanting to be inclusive with colleagues, you of course included April Glaspie, the Middle East hand at the mission.

WILLETT: Exactly. April was there, a little uncomfortable, as she told me ahead of time, going to a dinner with Said. But since she knew I'd secured permission, including permission for her to attend, she came. I think we did write the standard proforma MemCon, but it was pretty banal stuff.

Q: Well, the transition had by then occurred to Don McHenry. You mentioned how he was positioned to follow Andy Young. Was that then a reasonably smooth transition? A number of the personnel changed, of course, in the mission at that time.

WILLETT: Lots of personnel changed. Yes. Jim Leonard left and Bill Vanden Heuvel came in, different cup of tea altogether. Jim Leonard was a diplomat to the tips of his fingers, in the best sense of the term. He was a linguist, a subtle and highly cultured man. That's not to say Bill Vanden Heuvel was a boor.

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*Q: Jim, of course, career; Bill, non-career. WILLETT: Right. I believe he was a deputy mayor of New York?*

*Q: Seems right.*

WILLETT: Yes, and a well plugged in guy. Mind you, one of my early impressions of Bill Vanden Heuvel was quite something. I'm walking out of the mission, 45th Street and First Avenue, on my way to the Security Council. I look across the street and see what I think is Bill Vanden Heuvel, but something's wrong with his beautiful suit. It's all covered in red paint. Well it was Bill Vanden Heuvel, and his suit was covered in red paint. Somebody had thrown a paint bomb at him in the Security Council. The suit was beyond repair, but he took it all in stride. Perhaps he later recounted the event as one of the perils of diplomacy.

*Q: Was that Middle East related?*

WILLETT: Oh, just, I think, a vaguely anarchistic guy. You know, instead of throwing a bowling-ball bomb with a hissing fuse, he threw a paint bomb. But back in the mission there were a lot of changes. B. J. Jones left. Dick Gleysteen came in. Dick Petrie became Ambassador. And in passing I'd mention that Dick Petrie was one of the most superb drafters I've ever met. I said to him, "Dick, I want to learn how to write like you." I'd always send my cables through him, and he was always generous about going through them and commenting. "Now why don't you move this here and tighten this up and this isn't clear and your summary should be this." When I emerged from a year's tutoring with him, so to speak, I was a significantly better drafter of political analysis than before I came under his influence.

*Q: Dirk Gleysteen as political counselor was a change from B. J. Jones, but was not terribly well.*

WILLETT: No, he was not.



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*Q: For most of that period and subsequently, I'm afraid, died.*

WILLETT: But there was one thing about Dirk Gleysteen I liked immediately: he moved paper. When you sent something in to him, you got it back promptly, and you knew where you stood. "Throw this in the wastebasket." "Do it again." "This is okay, but change paragraph two." Whatever. That was a welcome change from the previous situation, where endless mounds of paper accrued on the political counselor desk and clearances took forever (though not all took forever in USUN, because some paper had to move rapidly). One of the reasons B.J. Jones was able to move any paper at all was because of her penchant for deleting comments, as I mentioned yesterday. She just wanted the facts, nothing but the facts. That made clearance of cables easy, in one respect. They become more difficult when you appendage ideas to them.

Anyway the Kampuchea seating question was resolved, if not in the way I advocated. Another issue I became involved in at USUN was the Western Sahara, which you, Dick, know so much about. That was like the Cyprus problem: one of those perennial UN issues, and once again, as you mentioned yesterday, it's coming to the fore. There's going to be some sort of a vote, but, of course, there's no chance that the King would allow any referendum separating the Western Sahara from Morocco proper.

*Q: But basically with Kampuchea behind you, transition to McHenry, your work, the work of the Political Section settled down to what passes in New York for routine?*

WILLETT: More or less. McHenry knew the Service and wanted the mission to function as a typical Foreign Service entity, with only the most important things coming onto his desk. He did not, unlike Andrew Young, enjoy discussion of problems that might, at first glance, appear secondary. He — and I can understand this — was more interested in the flow, how the flow worked. There exists an inner circular staircase that goes up to the permanent representative's office...

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*Q: From the Political Section.*

WILLETT: Exactly. At some point we were told to stop using that staircase. It would be limited to the political counselor, period. That was a symbol of the times.

Q: He, however, kept the cabinet rank of the position, participated in cabinet discussions in Washington, went back and forth, the way perm reps do.

WILLETT: That's right. And in that respect, in the U.S. Foreign Service, the job's unique. Of course the Secretary of State, himself a Cabinet minister, must always feel a bit odd seeing someone who ostensibly works for him attending Cabinet meetings and being questioned directly by the President. This said, I was not aware of any tiffs between Secretary Vance and permanent representative McHenry.

*Q: Were not some Middle Eastern votes changed at the last minute oinstructions from Washington, with great embarrassment?*

WILLETT: Yes, you're right.

Q: And Don McHenry was very much hanging out on at least one of those, where the vote had to be changed after Vance was, I think, overridden by the White House.

WILLETT: Yes. Your memory's better than mine on that. At USUN I was not directly involved in Middle East issues, though now and then I got involved. This was, of course, the time of the Iranian Hostage Crisis.

*Q: Sure.*

WILLETT: Warren Christopher, who was Deputy Secretary of State, and Arnie Raphel, a key deputy, were coming up to New York and meeting the Algerian permanent representative. As French speaker, I was brought into those sensitive meetings as both notetaker and interpreter. Now I mentioned yesterday that sometimes in such meetings

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the notetaker/interpreter acquires a more substantive role, and such was the case in this instance.

*Q: That was perhaps with Talib Ibrahimi? Or with a senior Algerian, in any case.*

WILLETT: With the Algerian perm rep in New York. I can't remember his name. Not Boutaflika, who was foreign minister at one point. I was impressed at the time watching one of our top U.S. diplomats work with the Algerian, seeing how he listened so carefully, posed the most appropriate questions. It made note taking easy, because there was something quintessentially logical about the way he and the Algerian conducted their exchanges. Of course we've never forgotten. To this day Washington has a soft spot in its cold heart for the Algerians and what they did.

*Q: That's certainly true.*

WILLETT: They're good diplomats, the Algerians. We can say what we like about their current government, but they're good diplomats. Things quieted down, of course, when the hostages were freed; but that was a time of secret meetings in Washington and elsewhere, with French lawyers who supposedly had ties with the mullahs arriving in New York.

*Q: There was a time when NSC advisers were taking birthday cakes to Teheran.*

WILLETT: Yes. I found it a humiliating time to be a U.S. diplomat. The worst day for me was when I learned that somebody in the White House was tying yellow ribbons in an oak tree in the White House garden, based on that then popular song, "Tie a Yellow Ribbon in the Old Oak Tree." I thought, This is a superpower government tying yellow ribbons in a tree in hopes the hostages will be home for Christmas? Of course, as it turned out, just to stick it to Jimmy Carter, the Iranians retained them till — what, till he became a lame duck President? It was a rough time for U.S. diplomacy.

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*Q: You had surely your share of public delegates — senators, congressmen, former governors. Any highlights there?*

WILLETT: No, except the one visitor I remember well, because I worked three months with him on a close basis, was Averell Harriman — the only American statesman whose picture, appreciatively signed, I've kept.

Harriman was head of the U.S. delegation to the first UN Special Session on Disarmament, and I was assigned his staff aide, though still working as directeur de cabinet for Jim Leonard. He vaguely remembered my dad, because the paths of Harriman and John J. McCloy had frequently crossed, and Dad had worked closely with McCloy after World War II, as I mentioned at the beginning of this conversation, on German reconstruction and the Marshall Plan. Harriman was by then an old man with the aura of greatness around him. After all, he'd had long conversations with Stalin, he'd been at Yalta, he was a part of history. The Administration brought him in to influence the way the first Special Session on Disarmament would unfold, and he was quite effective, despite his failing eyesight. He'd read with a special lamp; there'd only be 20 or 30 words in huge letters on a page, so that a speech of five minutes might be 30 or 40 pages. He'd turn over a page every 10 seconds or so. Sometimes he would test my memory to make sure I got things right.

*Q: Well, John, as I recall, you were living downtown. I remember a splendid cocktail once at your abode where, if memory serves, people like Susan Sontag and Gloria Steinem were circulating about. How was it to live in New York, versus your earlier time in Paris, from the point of view of getting around the city, getting out beyond the narrow diplomatic life?*

WILLETT: I went to USUN every morning and came home at night on my bicycle, which made things a lot easier. I used a bicycle to go to work for at least 15 of my 25 years in the Foreign Service. Living in the West Village was fun, very different from the Upper

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East Side, where from 12 on I grew up. Calvin Trillin, the writer, lived on the top two floors and owned the building, and we rented the bottom two floors and the garden. The West Village is, of course, a center of New York intellectual activity, and it was exciting to be down there. Susan Sontag in fact came over because when we were getting ready to leave, before my departure for Rome, she was thinking of renting the place. She looked all through it and said, "But my books won't fit in here." She must have had a lot of books because it was a pretty big place.

Q: Well, John, before we move you on to Rome, is there anything we haven't touched on in USUN, and if not, how did the assignment come about in Rome and how was the transition?

WILLETT: The assignment came about because an opening occurred unexpectedly. Kathy Shirley, the lady handling foreign affairs in the Rome Political Section, was assigned somewhere else, I think as DCM, and her position opened up. I spoke Italian, first, because my mother was of Italian origin and, secondly, because I'd studied and worked in Italy. At the same time, my wife and I had to confront the problem of all Foreign Service couples in which both spouses work (and it gets even more complicated when one of them is not Foreign Service). Somebody has to give way. We were still young then and had not yet had our first child, so the idea of my leaving for Rome and Chantal's following me later was something we could envisage.

Q: *She had already her career in banking.*

WILLETT: Yes. She was starting out in banking, and to resign after less than three years in her bank would have been a bad move. So we agreed she would stay on for a fourth year and that she would complete her MBA at New York University, which the bank was paying for. I went off to Rome alone in January of 1981, I believe it was, filled with joy at returning to a city I loved, but sad to be leaving my wife back in New York. We got to see

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one another fairly regularly, which meant once every three months. That was the first of our numerous separations in the course of the next 15 years, nine of which we lived apart.

I arrived in Rome and Max Rabb, whose daughter had roomed with my younger sister at Smith and whom my father had known on Wall Street, was named ambassador. By sheer coincidence I could look forward to working for an old family friend. In Trastevere, one of the old quarters of Rome, I bought a sixth floor walk-up and a bicycle, and jumped into the job. I had the entire foreign affairs dossier, which meant that virtually every day I went to the Farnesina, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, lodged in the former headquarters of the Fascist Party. As you cross the bridge to approach the building, you'll see an enormous obelisk with the word MUSSOLINI DUX engraved on it. Every day, I traveled to the MFA, dutifully made the four or five demarches in my briefcase and returned to the Via Veneto to draft the reporting cables. This was in addition to regular staff meetings with my Embassy colleagues, encounters with other diplomats, going to Italian think tanks, etc. The ambiance in the Embassy was good; I loved the city and the Romans. In short, it turned out to be an enriching time.

Q: And of course, Italian politics is always turbulent. There must have been changes of government and changes of foreign policy positions that you were involved in.

WILLETT: I arrived in Italy in the wake of the Aldo Moro murder, and the national mood was grim. The Embassy was in a state of constant high alert, which in view of the General Dozier case proved to be worthwhile. Italian politics are still in permanent crisis. The word *crisi* doesn't mean the same thing in Italian as in English. Keep in mind that in an Italian airport — where the French put correspondance to indicate passage from one airplane to another — the Italians have *coincidenza*, “coincidence.” That's what much of the country is about; politics is a rough-and-tumble thing. Now we've learned that many of those people — Bettino Craxi and then foreign minister, Andreotti, and others — were up to their ears in high crime, if not assassinations, murder-for-hire things. While I was there, the Banco Ambrosiano scandal erupted. Roberto Calvi, the Vatican's banker, was found hanging

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under a bridge in London, and there was Monsignor Marcinkus, a sinister American who advised the Pope on financial affairs. The whole country seethed with corruption. There were a lot of murders. I mentioned the General Dozier case, the kidnaping of a U.S. NATO general.

*Q: In the north of Italy, was he? Maybe Verona or someplace?*

WILLETT: I think that was it. He did something he'd been warned against: opening the front door without first ascertaining who was there. The Red Brigades immediately trussed him up and trundled him away. The U.S. Government tried everything to find him, working closely with the Italians. Our Political Section was turned into a communications center, our offices taken over by special forces people who came in with all sorts of sophisticated equipment. At one point a clairvoyant arrived with a message something like, "He is in a farmhouse on a hill in Tuscany with three windows facing south. The third window is open." Carabinieri immediately fanned out across the hills of Tuscany looking for a site that matched this description. Of course they found nothing. Dozier was eventually rescued in a brilliant operation by Italian police forces masquerading as garbage collectors. Absolutely brilliant. They captured the whole gang without injuring anyone, in a very deft maneuver. Dozier returned to the United States, and that was the end of it.

*Q: He had been somewhat mistreated, is that not so?*

WILLETT: Yes, he was mistreated, but he was okay.

*Q: These were the so-called "Brigate Rosse."*

WILLETT: The Brigade Rosse, a nasty collection of people.

*Q: And they were at that time linked perhaps to the Bader Meinhof iGermany and part of the continentwide radical fringe?*

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WILLETT: Yes, the R#te Armee Faktion and the Brigades rouges in France. I think they were all linked more or less loosely, but the center of power seemed to be in Italy, where some university professors were declared members of the Red Brigades. Their theory was, "We'll make things so bad they'll have to impose a police state. The people will resent this and bring down the government." What the French call "la politique du pire:" make things as bad as you can because then, from our point of view, they can only get better. The Italians are a resilient people and they weathered this storm, but it was a rough period. One American with an aid organization was killed, do you remember? They came up behind him in his so-called bulletproof car and fired machine guns at the rear window until it gave way under the impact.

*Q: This was in Rome.*

WILLETT: I believe so. I wrote a brief elegy for the man that MaRabb delivered in that enormous, ornate Red Room in the Embassy.

*Q: Max Rabb himself had some threats and was removed for a time frohis post. They were threats of similar origin?*

WILLETT: I was not privy to that. Claire Sterling wrote a book on terrorism. This was the time of Ali Agca's attempt on the Pope. There was a theory that the Bulgarians, working for the Russians, had put him up to it. Nothing was ever proven, but the debate was open: just some crazy Moslem fanatic off on his own, or was it a sophisticated East European plot, masterfully covered-up, to kill a Polish pope who could undermine Soviet authority in the Bloc? To this day I don't think it's public knowledge what Ali Agca was really about. I had talks with the Station on this; they had their own theories.

Q: It was on your watch, John, that an Italian liner was hijacked and the American Leon Klinghoffer in a wheelchair was assassinated by terrorists. Those responsible were brought to Italy and then released, and John Whitehead came out on a mission



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to convince the Italians to cooperate. It was a moment of some high tension you were involved in probably.

WILLETT: That was a rough patch between the U.S. and Italy. I wasn't particularly involved, but I know it was a source of deep concern, almost strife, between the Italians and the Americans. Italy doesn't have the same kind of complex towards the United States that, say, the French do. She's more inclined to roll with the punch and view big, browbeating Uncle Sam with a certain Latin patience and good humor: "After all, the Americans are only human, too. They're clumsy and they make stupid mistakes and, you know, we'll live with this." This makes them at once good and bad NATO partners. But on this question they were quite riled up. I can't talk about it in any detail, not because I'm reluctant to, but because it wasn't my brief.

Q: John Whitehead, in his oral history, describes coming just after that incident, when the Italians were refusing to participate in the G7 meeting at Williamsburg because of it, to convince them to take part and having to very forcibly squeeze Max Rabb's knee under the table to keep him quiet so that he would not rile up the discussion. He must have been a strong personality, somewhat of an ego thinking about his own oral history. Knowing him before, how did you find it working with him?

WILLETT: I didn't know Max Rabb personally before getting to Rome. My father did. I found him a good person to work for. We had one problem, because sometime in there I sent off a message advocating an open dialogue with the PLO.

Q: *You had been advocating that before at USUN.*

WILLETT: Right, but this was a formal Dissent Channel message, and the DCM had to go in to the Ambassador and explain to him that he couldn't stop the cable. I think Rabb was hurt that the son of an old friend and business partner could do such a thing. Perhaps he

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felt personally targeted. It took a while to get back in his good graces, but eventually things worked out.

Q: At that point in time, regular contacts were in progress in Tunis with the PLO. We had a designated channel there. Meetings were occurring all the time. Being in Rome, somewhat far from that particular action, what got into you, where were you coming from in wanting to send such a Dissent Channel message?

WILLETT: It was something I'd always felt strongly. I can't recall exactly what I was advocating, but of course to be a Dissent Channel message, it would have had to go beyond our policy at that time regarding the PLO. There again, as in the Kampuchea seat question, SS sent back a negative reply, but a better-crafted one. The one on Kampuchea was a tortured and ill-reasoned response, while the reply concerning the PLO was well thought out and convincing.

Q: It's not every FSO, John, that has repeated recourse to the Dissent Channel. Did you find as a result that your career advanced, slowed down? Were you regarded, # la Lannon Walker, as a young Turk and given a wide berth, or how did people view you because of your dissent?

WILLETT: There were only two dissent messages in my career: the Kampuchea seat question and the Palestinian cable. The first, as I mentioned yesterday, I could never regret. The Palestinian cable, involving an issue I didn't treat directly, was doubtless rather na#ve. I don't believe I contributed anything towards a reformulation of U.S. policy. Did these two messages hurt my career? I don't believe so, although certainly Dick Holbrooke did not appreciate having to go upstairs to the Secretary's office and defend his policy twice because of some little twerp in New York. Once, I believe it was after Rome, when Jean Kirkpatrick was Perm Rep in New York, I was contemplating going back there. Chantal and I thought, well, I could return to USUN, this time as a political officer first secretary level, and Chantal could get back to her bank. I was later told that Rosenstock

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went to see Jean Kirkpatrick, when he learned I was bidding on the job, and said to her, in effect, "Do you want somebody in here who could write a message embarrassing you?" I never heard back from her, and to my knowledge was never even considered for the job. But did this hurt my career? I don't think so, because my advancements were fairly regular, and eventually I was promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. When I voluntarily retired, for family reasons, I had years to go before I would become susceptible to the selection-out process. I could have hung on and perhaps been promoted to MC, or whatever it's called now.

Q: Well, John, having been by then both in Rome and Paris, how did the level of attention to Italy and what you were reporting compare to that in Paris? Was Italy taken with the same level of seriousness, or were they somewhat peripheral?

WILLETT: No, Italy was not considered with the same level of seriousness. The U.S. often took Italy for granted. There was one occasion when the Secretary was on his way somewhere — to London and Paris and Bonn — but was not planning a Rome stop. The Italians went through the roof. If I remember correctly, the plane was rerouted at some point and made a stop in Ciampino. The Secretary came for a few hours and saw whoever the Foreign Minister was then, maybe Andreotti. The Italians felt sometimes that we slighted them, and they resented it. We often bent over backwards to make them feel good about themselves, but it didn't always work. I see why you'd pose the question. Within NATO, for example, the Italians were not considered on a level with Britain, France and the FRG.

Q: Were you conscious, being in Rome, of the particular inputs of the various Italian-American organizations and Italian-American public opinion?

WILLETT: No, not particularly. I don't remember being pressured by Italian NGOs, or whatever public organizations are called in the United States. PACs? We did have a steady stream of senators, staffers and congressmen coming through, and frequently they

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had Italian names. The Italians kind of liked this. I mean, after all, it's an "in" to the higher echelons of U.S. power, this kind of ethnic tie. And indeed in the Embassy, there were a lot of Italian-Americans who had applied to work there — secretaries, officers —because of their Italian origins.

*Q: Well, John, before we move on from Italy, is there anything further you want to put on the record?*

WILLETT: No. I prolonged my tour there by one year, which while not a career enhancing move, was a soul enhancing one. I never had a dull day in Italy. I loved the work, as I mentioned, and I loved the country and the life there and the culture; I left it with regret. I remember the very moment, a winter day, with my friend Freck Vreeland leaning from an upper window of the Embassy to wave good-bye. I drove my car out of the parking lot and away from Rome, never to live there again. I've been back once since, and I feel strong ties to the Rome Embassy, to Italy, and to what goes on in Italy. All these scandals involving people I had dealt with, as I mentioned earlier — Craxi, Andreotti, etc. When I first arrived in Rome, I stayed at the Raphael on the Piazza Navona. Craxi had a permanent suite in the same hotel, and I'd see him there all the time. Now he's a fugitive in Hammamet, Tunisia! And Andreotti... I remember him making a speech in the Residence when he was foreign minister. Even then the Italian press, which is merciless towards its political figures, ferociously pilloried him. But now they're all in Dutch.

*Q: Moving then from there to your first Washington assignment...*

WILLETT: Yes, first real Washington assignment.

*Q: Initially in the International Organizations Bureau, working with a political appointee — we can fill that in later.*

WILLETT: I had a strange job. I covered the Africa dossier in IO/UNP, and traditionally the person who handled that job was on Chet Crocker's team, because the Angola question

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and the whole gamut of southern African issues — Namibia, Angola, apartheid — were dealt with in the UN. Every few weeks Assistant Secretary Crocker would travel up to New York and see the UN Secretary General, who at that time was Perez de Cuellar. The Africa officer in IO/UNP — you can see the logic in this — was a natural to go along, contribute to policy formulation, note take, etc. One ran back and forth between two offices, a situation highly resented by the IO Assistant Secretary, Allen Keyes.

*Q: Allen Keyes, that's right.*

WILLETT: Highly resented by Keyes but appreciated by Chet Crocker. It would be difficult to imagine two more different men. Crocker was a real leader; he gave off a power of conviction, and he was certain, correctly as it turned out, that you couldn't solve one problem in southern Africa without addressing all of them together.

*Q: Backed up by your old friend Frank Wisner.*

WILLETT: Right.

*Q: This was a complete reversal of the South African policy that hapreceded, of Carter, Andy Young and McHenry, very much more activist.*

WILLETT: Oh, much more activist, more conceptual and all-encompassing. "Reversal" might be too much, Dick. It was the old policy of "We favor an end to apartheid" suddenly given some meat. The U.S. had always supported a peaceful solution to the Namibia problem, but instead of just wishing, we started doing something about it. Crocker would invite ideas. First of all, he was a scholar and an academic, smart as a whip. He was also an elegant man, in thought, speech and appearance. He had, for better and for worse, almost a French way of addressing people. Of course, he put off a number of congressmen, because he could not brook a fool. On the other hand, Crocker did such a beautiful job that it was hard to get at him. The conservatives loathed him for going too far one way, and the liberals for not going far enough. In my view this means he must have

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been doing something right. Now, I didn't make those long trips to southern Africa with him because I didn't want to. When this became clear, Chet didn't push it. On the other hand, he did use me for Security Council debates and, as I mentioned, for meetings with Perez de Cuellar.

I remember those encounters vividly. Crocker would sit ramrod straight in his chair, legs crossed, listening attentively and making short asides that had no warmth if he didn't agree with what he was hearing. He well understood that the UN Secretary General simply cannot be in the US' pocket, so he didn't expect a servile line from Perez; he may, however, have sought more than the Secretary General could deliver. This is all in Chet's big book that came out a few years ago. I heard — I had already left Washington by this time — that when the Namibia problem was solved, all the assistant secretaries attending a senior staff meeting in the Secretary's office stood up and applauded when Chet walked into the room. He'd brought back the document, the “peace in our time,” the real peace in our time, not the pipedream Chamberlain carried home from Munich. Even now things are holding up. Angola has slipped a bit, but South Africa's staying the course, and so is Namibia. Had it not been for Chet Crocker, things would doubtless be a hell of a lot worse. Arnie Raphel's widow, Nancy Ely Raphel, was, as I mentioned, a key team member.

*Q: Now she's ambassador in Slovenia.*

WILLETT: Good for Nancy!

*Q: From the Legal Adviser's Office.*

WILLETT: Exactly. There were six or seven people on Chet's team, as he called it. He'd group them periodically to brainstorm. When those endless Security Council and General Assembly debates or votes on the Namibia question or apartheid occurred, things would heat up. The person in IO/UNP doing the AF question — at that time me — was on one phone talking with the Security Council in New York, and on another with somebody in AF. You were juggling, and at certain times a decision on how to vote would require White-

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House clearance. You know how it is. I'm not telling you anything. There was a lot of tension.

And a lot of tension between Allen Keyes and Chet Crocker. I remember my first meeting with Keyes. He sat us down in a little room and announced, in essence: "Okay, I've been an FSO. I've served in New York. I know what the score is better than anybody in this room, so you all shape up and do what I tell you, because you don't know your ass from a hole in the ground." I raised my hand and said, "But I served three years in New York, and I did some African issues when I was up there." He looked at me as if he'd have liked to hit me.

Once I was in his office and somebody walked in, one of his principal deputies. Keyes's nostrils flared, he asked me to leave the room. A moment later, from outside the closed door, I heard a cry and the sound of breaking glass. Half a minute later, as Keyes's secretary and I stared aghast, this deputy assistant secretary comes out of his office shaking in terror. Keyes had an ungovernable temper and was, I am convinced, a real detriment to U.S. diplomacy. He had only one issue on his agenda, foreign or domestic: What's in it for Keyes? That's all. And to think he's going to run for President...!

*Q: He subsequently ran unsuccessfully for Congress.*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: Chet Crocker and Frank Wisner were, of course, a strong team.*

WILLETT: That they were.

*Q: Frank was somebody you'd worked with before. They workeextremely closely*

WILLETT: Yes.

*Q: And made a strong bureau.*

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WILLETT: A very strong bureau. As far as I could see, there was complete symbiosis between those two. Each one may have respected the qualities in the other that perhaps he had less of. They worked off each other, and they worked well.

*Q: And urged you, then, into the AF bureau from IO.*

WILLETT: Well, I wasn't really in the AF bureau, Dick. My real office was in IO/UNP. I simply moved back and forth. They were concurrent jobs, which was a main part of the problem. There might be a Keyes staff meeting and he'd say, "Where's Willett?" Somebody would reply, "Oh, he's with Crocker. They're having a team meeting." Keyes did not like the situation at all, which added to their rivalry. But while Crocker was slowly working his way towards success in resolving southern African problems, Allen Keyes didn't appear to be going anywhere, on anything. Then Keyes left and Greg Newell, a Mormon, came in, a quiet, decent guy. I didn't know him very well.

*Q: Rather young.*

WILLETT: Rather young. I left shortly after that.

*Q: Subsequently went to Sweden as ambassador.*

WILLETT: Right.

*Q: But you had a busy three years in Washington with that portfolio, long hours, commuting marriage to New York, probably.*

WILLETT: Commuting marriage to New York. I certainly helped erase Amtrak's debt problem. You know, with a government passport you get 20 percent off your ticket, but even there I was blowing 120 bucks a week just getting home to see my family. On summer weekends I would get a train to eastern Long Island, where we were renting a house. In order to remain with my family as long as possible, I got to taking the night train



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on Sundays, back to Washington in a sleeping car. I'd kiss my wife and child goodbye at 10 o'clock in New York, grab a subway to Penn Station and install myself in the Pullman car, on an obscure siding in the bowels of the station. As of 10 PM it was made available to passengers on the New-York-to-Washington run, even though the train didn't leave until three the next morning. I'd go to sleep, and wake up as the train pulled into the Washington Station.

Just after Christmas in 1985, my mother died, very suddenly. She'd been with us for Christmas, and on December 27, she had a stroke. I stayed in New York for the funeral and was absent a week longer than I'd intended. I mention this because my next pay slip indicated that I had taken 10 days vacation. I said, "What do you mean, I've taken 10 days vacation?" "You were up in New York for your mother's funeral," they answered. Well, I was in a pretty distraught state, and I hit the roof. "What? You're equating my mother's death with a vacation? You put that down as administrative leave." And they did it. I don't know whether that's now Department policy, but I find it hard to imagine that up until recently funerals counted as vacation. Anyway, that's peripheral.

Q: Well, John, in most people's career there's a dichotomy between bureaucratic Washington service and field service. You're either a field officer or a Washington bureaucrat. Where do you put yourself on that spectrum after this Washington tour?

WILLETT: I only had one hardship post, and that was Washington. First of all, I hailed from Western Massachusetts and New York City. People from New York may have a harder time adjusting to life in Washington than those from elsewhere in the country. It's a different kind of city. On this occasion I went from Rome, waking up on my rooftop apartment to the bells of Santa Maria in Trastevere, to Columbia Plaza, to the stale, humorless aura that Washington puts out for me. I may have even been clinically depressed in Washington. My mother's death didn't help things. And the separations... After all, I lived apart from my wife two out of my four years in Rome; now here I was once again in a different city from her, commuting back and forth. By then we'd our first child. It

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was a rough time in our marriage. I never wanted to see Washington again, and I'm glad I had only one assignment there. I feel more at ease living abroad, not for the perks, but the lifestyle. I found Washington grim, morose — whatever. I'm clearly in the Foreign Service and not the civil service camp.

*Q: So on that note, in early '88 you headed back to Paris.*

WILLETT: Yes, that was a real battle. I and a friend of mine, Dean Curran, then working for Armacost up on the Seventh Floor, were both vying for the job. I'd been promoted to FSO1. I was eligible. The deputy political counselor job was opening up in the Paris Political Section; it's an important, challenging job, and I really wanted it. Though there may have been many other officers more deserving than I (because my posts added up to quite something when you look down the list at them), I felt nobody was more qualified. So Dean and I got into a figurative slugfest on this. He had Armacost on his side; I had Hank Cohen on mine. Hank was in the Director General's office.

*Q: Perhaps he was the head of Personnel?*

WILLETT: I really wanted that job! I arrived in Paris in January 1987 and moved into the flat we're still in. Chantal followed shortly thereafter with our firstborn son, and I felt everything was in front of me. I'd been recently promoted. I'd secured the job I wanted in a city I knew well. I felt certain I'd do a crackerjack job. Chantal found work in a bank and we plunged in. I didn't give a second's thought to the morrow. I didn't want to focus on what would happen. I said to myself, "If you start thinking about what you'll be doing in the summer of 1991 when this job runs out, you're going to go crazy."

For the first time, I had real executive authority over a number of American diplomats; I could motivate a team and get them doing things. In addition I had the confidence of the front office and the political counselor. Who was the political counselor at the time? Kim Pendleton, no, before Kim it was Peter Semler. I was given a lot of leeway to mold things, craft them as I saw fit. I thought the Political Section had good esprit de corps

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and I flattered myself with being in part responsible for it. There I was in at a fairly high policymaking level, brought into a number of the Ambassador's meetings, etc.

*Q: The Ambassador being Joe Rodgers, a political appointee from Tennessee, and the DCM Mark Lissfelt?*

WILLETT: Then Rodgers was replaced by...

*Q: By Walter Curley from New York, who had been Ambassador in Dublin, I believe.*

WILLETT: Right. I was not so close to Rodgers, who incarnated what many French think of as "American."

*Q: So they were reassured by a Tennessee appointee, without French, I understand.*

WILLETT: Right, no French, which, of course, turned people like me into interpreters, a job we sometimes resented, but — what the heck — that goes with the work.

One of the highlights of this time for me in the Political Section was the CSCE Paris summit in, what, 1988, 1989? I volunteered for, and was appointed, control officer for that event. And control officer in a Class I embassy for a Presidential visit is really something! You hold meetings with a 120 people, you have a "third baggage handler," a this and a that.

*Q: It was by then President Bush.*

WILLETT: Exactly. "Pre-advance teams" and "advance teams" blow into town, and you're running all over the place. There isn't a great deal of substance, except when you get down to writing the briefing papers, those little one page jobs, wherein the creation of the world is summed up in 30 lines. It's a good exercise in brevity.

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We all really worked for those three days with George Bush. I rode in the car with him to a dinner Mitterrand hosted at Versailles. As he was leaving for Washington Bush said to me, "Good job, John," which became a joke in POL. If ever something went wrong, someone would say, "Bad job, John."

Q: George Bush had cultivated Mitterrand, had had him informally for a week at Kennebunkport. Surprisingly, the chemistry between those two was good. Was that your observations?

WILLETT: Well, I'm not sure the personal chemistry was that good, but Bush went out of his way to ensure a close relationship. On his side Mitterrand, a pretty conniving guy, also walked the extra mile. I remember two things about Kennebunkport visit. One, I knew that President Mitterrand liked wearing cardigan sweaters, and when the White House said, "What would be an appropriate gift?" I suggested giving him an L.L. Bean Kennebunkport sweater, which they did. It was placed on Mitterrand's bed in Kennebunkport. During the consultations with the Elys#e to set up the Maine meeting, I had called to ask Madame Mitterrand's chief of staff, very frankly, whether she and the President shared a double bed or whatever. Rather a personal question, but the Bush place in Kennebunkport is not all that big. The woman at the palace frigidly responded that President and Mrs. Mitterrand never shared a bed. I said, well, okay, we'll keep that in mind. And it was dutifully done: twin beds were installed in Kennebunkport.

I found it interesting to observe how the highest level works and thinks. I met Brent Scowcroft and that terrible man Sununu. I met again Joe Verner Reed, whom I knew from my days at USUN. He'd become head of protocol.

Q: *This was the CSCE summit, or Kennebunkport?*

WILLETT: CSCE. I beg your pardon. This was all here in Paris. didn't go to Kennebunkport.

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Q: Walter Curley had not yet come to Paris, but George Bush introduced him there to Mitterrand as an old friend and a future ambassador designate with whom he, Mitterrand, could deal. Walter Curley viewed that as the best precedent he could have starting out here.

WILLETT: You're right. Joe Rodgers was still on board then. But there was also a visit to someplace in Florida. Mitterrand had gone to Mexico, I believe, and then stopped off for a day or two in Florida. After that visit an article appeared in Time, on the page they used to entitle "People." There were 20 lines speculating that the French President had cancer. This was around 1990.

Q: *Yes, definitely.*

WILLETT: Something like that.

Q: At that time, Walter Curley — already here and charged with ascertaining the facts of Mitterrand's health before that Florida visit — called on Mitterrand and considered him to be in fine health. But when he arrived in Florida he was not doing so well.

WILLETT: He was not doing so well. He had the kind of puffiness that people on cortisone often acquire. And along comes this article speculating that he had cancer, which, of course, he did.

Shortly thereafter I went to one of these political think tank meetings that abound in Paris, at the Sorbonne. Former Foreign Minister Michel Jobert was talking to a room of 200 people, a small room, filled with his coterie. He said, in essence, "This is typical of the CIA at work, planting a rumor that our president has cancer expressly to weaken the French presidency and thereby undermine France as a European power." He extrapolated from this article. When I raised my hand to respond, identifying myself as the deputy political counselor of the U.S. Embassy...

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*Q: Identifying yourself as that?*

WILLETT: Absolutely, and as first secretary, whatever. I said to Jobert that American journalists were obsessed with the health of public figures, obsessed, and that the American public adored reading about the ill health of its leaders. They considered this part and parcel of their "right to know," and consequently this little Time piece should not be considered some sort of nefarious plot on the part of the CIA. I did add, rather undiplomatically, that I felt Jobert's comments were unfortunate, because his anti-Americanism, or the rumors about his anti-Americanism, would be more given more currency by this kind of speculation.

He went bananas, treating me to a vitriolic ad hominem attack. "How is it possible for the Americans to send such na#ve people abroad to represent their country? How can you sit there, young man, and tell me the CIA was not behind this? Don't you know what your own government is doing? Haven't you any idea?" I had to take it because I was a first secretary on assignment in the country for which Jobert had been foreign minister. Had I responded in kind, I would have found myself in real trouble. When, after this attack, I tried simply to reiterate my point that American journalists closely followed and reported on the health of political leaders, the chairman of the meeting refused me the floor. An embarrassing moment for me, that much I remember. Michel Jobert lives nearby. I sometimes see him on the street.

Q: Well, were there other issues that were particular highlights? This was a time of many issues between the U.S. and France, and as deputy section chief you had quite a large field.

WILLETT: Yes, but I had a good team, good officers in the section. Some were young, some not so young, but they all knew they had important work to do. It was a specialized section, as I mentioned yesterday. One officer doing the Middle East. One doing Latin

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American. One doing Asia. Four people doing internal politics, etc., etc. This is before the big personnel slashes of the last few years.

*Q: How did you and Kim Pendleton, the political counselor, divide, and how was that as a working relationship?*

WILLETT: I had my own bailiwicks that I carved out for myself with Kim's accord, and Kim was content to leave the day-to-day management of the section in my hands. Of course, he wanted, and rightly, to chop on any policy cables, to decide what should go to the front office. He counted on my using good judgment as to whose name went on the approval line: his, mine, the DCM's or the Ambassador's. After working in the section for a few months, I had a pretty good idea how high up a cable needed to go. Kim or I could approve routine reporting on Middle East issues, but if we got into U.S. policy at a higher level, it might have to go to the DCM. Or if the Ambassador had been involved in the issue in any way, if it tied into a demarche previously been made by him, then of course, he was the one who chopped off.

Ambassador Curley, was an activist, and most competent in carrying out demarches. Once he went over and made nine demarches to the acting Foreign Minister, one after another, all of them perfectly. I accompanied him on that meeting and wrote up the subsequent reporting. He said everything exactly as instructed. And he was generous with his table. The Internal Political Unit would propose a lunch with a political leader, and he'd say, "Sure, let's do it." He opened the residence up to families, kids, Christmas parties — whatever. In that sense he was exceptional. Furthermore, his office was accessible. You could go in to see one of his staffers and say, "Look, something bothers me about what's happening in this section or that section of the Embassy, and I want to talk to the Ambassador." You could do it.

*Q: Mark Lissfelt was an encouraging, laid-back kind of a manager. They had good relations, the Embassy seemed to click over pretty well?*

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WILLETT: Yes, it did. Mark left all the running around to other people. He would go through his cubic foot of cables each morning. He would make sure the paper was moving, and he would jog people now and then with a handwritten note or a phone call: "Where's this? Where's that?" One knew somebody was up front keeping an eye on things. He was not the sort of DCM who never gets over being a political officer. He left the job of political reporting up to the Political Section, and economic reporting up to the Economic Section. He didn't do much reporting on his own or go out and seek contacts. He ran the Embassy, the principal task of a DCM.

*Q: It's a full-time job.*

WILLETT: It's a full-time job in an embassy of — what, 900 people? A thousand? I don't know. Walter Curley counted on him to run the Embassy.

*Q: You had a look or perspective on the Embassy separated by about a decade. Notice any changes? Morale better, worse, the same? Always difficult in such a big place? Or what do you think?*

WILLETT: Morale is always difficult in these big embassies. As regards Paris, I don't think the American compound out at Neuilly is a good idea. Americans are clumped together in apartment buildings, seeing no French, living a transported American life, doing all their shopping at the commissary. The "wild life" is going out together once a week to dinner in the Latin Quarter; that's the extent of their insertion into Parisian life. If I had any recommendation to make to the Embassy in Paris or to the Department, I'd say to FBO, "Get rid of Neuilly. Let people who come to Paris pick out their own housing if they can, or give them an option." Since I knew a lot of the secretaries and officers had to live out in Neuilly, on my second tour I arranged things beforehand. I said, "I refuse to live in Neuilly. I can't do my political job out there. I can't invite contacts to a Neuilly apartment building. They're not going to come. It's got to be an accessible apartment, where they can arrive at 8:30 at night and not be exhausted." They let me do it. You know, they give you the



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maximum housing allowance, and you rent an apartment in that range. Things worked out fine.

Q: But between '77, when you first left Paris, and '91, when you next left Paris, had the world of the Embassy changed — in the sense that you now had 24 hour CNN, you had Internet, you had information all around you? Was the political reporting function as important as it was before? Had it changed?

WILLETT: I did not notice a change in the political reporting, although my focus was on a broader spectrum. I had to pay attention to more issues. When I was in the internal unit, by definition, I was focused on French domestic affairs. When I was deputy political counselor, I had not only to include domestic political affairs in my area of focus, but the whole shmeer. Even some of the political-military cables were cleared with the deputy political counselor. I didn't notice that CNN made any particular difference in our work, though I might be misleading myself on that. For example, the Iraq mess. Everybody was away on holiday when Baghdad invaded Kuwait in the summer of 1991, so a large share of the reporting burden from Paris fell on my shoulders. There were only a couple of us left in the Political Section to do a tremendous amount of work.

Six months later, during Desert Storm, I became - principally by dint of speaking good French and with Ambassador's Curley consent - a kind of “talking head” for the Embassy on French TV and French radio, explaining U.S. policy. I appeared on Patrick Poivre d'Arvor's television program, and on the radio. I was interviewed. Old friends I hadn't seen in 25 years called up saying they'd seen me on the tube. Of course we won, which made the task easy. Everybody loves a winner. In one debate former president Gemayel of Lebanon, a man from the PLO, an Israeli and I debated the situation.

People were impressed by the technology of U.S. destructive power, you know, films of laser guided smart bombs zipping through a particular pre-selected window. So to get back to your question, I'd say those CNN tapes did bestow a certain aura on U.S. military

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technology, and in fact tempered reactions, in France at least, to the U.S.-led assault. A far different cry from what's happened today, where most people in France, including the French Government, are dead set against the December strike on Baghdad that President Clinton ordered.

Q: But, John, the French had been very reluctant in the mid '80's to allow landing or refueling for the raid on Tripoli, and the U.S. coming into the Gulf War coalition, one couldn't take the French for granted. It was a lot of coalition building. France came into it, of course, but the French forces were somewhat separate from the British and American. You must have been in the thick of that diplomacy, which had very high stakes indeed.

WILLETT: Yes, high stakes, and the U.S. was glad just to get the French participating in some way.

*Q: President Bush was undoubtedly on the horn directly to Mitterrand to make it possible.*

WILLETT: We reminded the French at the time of what you just raised: the GOF refusal to let the warplanes attacking Tripoli overfly French territory, forcing them to make a lengthy roundabout through the Straits of Gibraltar. We reminded them of that and said, "Look, this should not happen again." It was in part handled via discreet contacts with the French minister of defense.

Q: Did he not resign, Chevènement, because France joined Desert Storm? I recall a contretemps and the defense minister was replaced as a result of that.

WILLETT: Right. Today Chevènement is back in the French government. He had a serious stroke, and it wasn't certain whether he'd be able to reassume his job. The problem with Chevènement from the American point of view is that the man is pro-Iraqi, a former President of the French-Iraqi Friendship Group in the Chamber of Deputies, which makes it difficult for us to deal with him on the Iraqi question. I don't believe he's particularly well disposed towards the United States, the case of many officials in this country.

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Perhaps I'll just take a second here to say that Gaullism in France today is not a reflection of General de Gaulle's attitude. Rather de Gaulle's attitude incarnated the sentiments, then and now, of many ranking French bureaucrats and a certain segment of the population. He simply personified a point of view that already existed, that still exists: namely, that the United States constitutes a threat, that it's taking over the world, not with arms but through economic might, "cultural imperialism," etc. The GOF can't abide that. On the other hand, it's convinced the United States is biting its nails to the quick over the Euro or the advent of the Community, the future and power of the EC, that we're anxious over waxing EC power.

Q: Well, John, all good things come to an end. I see that you moved in September '91 to Strasbourg as Consul General. I assume your term had ended in Paris, that you wanted to be close to the family, that this was a logical move. Is this a fair reading?

WILLETT: Let me tell you exactly what happened, Dick. I had resigned from the Foreign Service, sent in a resignation cable, which became lost in the shuffle.

*Q: Resigned because of tandem careers?*

WILLETT: Yes, I didn't want to leave my wife again, so I was prepared to resign as an FSO1, accept my modest retirement and take my chances here in Paris. I sent in a cable of resignation, though I admit my hand was shaking a bit when I initialed it.

*Q: Because you loved this line of work.*

WILLETT: Yes, I did. It wasn't as if I were quitting out of frustration or because I hadn't been promoted or something. I derived great intellectual satisfaction from my work. In addition, the Foreign Service is like the enormous milk-filled dug of State, the mother cow. It takes care of your worries, and it gives you a sense of importance. It gives you those prerogatives and perquisites. People sit up a little straighter when they see your black passport. It has all sorts of financial advantages when you're abroad, so that one's

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salary is by no means a reflection of one's lifestyle. People get accustomed to these gratifications.

I was turning my back on everything, and I'd gone through such hell to get into the Foreign Service. That made it even harder. In the summer of 1991 I'd hit 50, the bare minimum for retiring. So in May I sent off a cable, with the plan of leaving the Foreign Service by September of 1991. In early July the promotion list came out and I'd been named to the Senior Foreign Service.

I'd started the Foreign Service with a thumping error. They'd told me to take my exam in Venice, where a consulate didn't exist. Now I was ending my foreign service on another. I'd resigned, and they promoted me. Ambassador Curley invited me into his office for a glass of champagne, I and one other officer in the Embassy who'd also been promoted into the Senior Foreign Service. He said to the other guy, "Well, you made it to the Senior Foreign Service. Congratulations after all those years of hard work." Then he turned to me with a big smile on his face and said, "And you made it to the Senior Foreign Service because you resigned. I guess that's one way to do it, too." We all laughed.

So the question became now what? Suddenly everything was up in the air. I had to talk to Chantal, because we'd made various plans. I was starting to look around for another job; our second kid was on the way, "in the oven," as the French say. My reasoning was: "If I stay only three more years, my retirement increases from \$30,000 to \$50,000, 70 per cent." That's a powerful incentive. Chantal said, "Well, okay, but what are we going to do? I've got this job in a bank. If I quit again, I'll never be rehired, because I'm going to have a record of resignations. I went to New York and quit and went to Rome, then I went back to New York, quit again and came to Paris. Now if I resign in Paris, people will say, 'You can't hire this woman; she quits all the time.'"

I said, "Well, I'll find some way to stay close to you." Walter Curley helped me a lot. The consul general in Strasbourg, Ints Silins, of Lithuanian origin, had been named

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ambassador to Lithuania, so the place was empty. Curley said, "Go on up there. It's only an FS1 level job, but if you'll take the downstep..." "Sure," I said, "I'll take it." There I was back in the Washington-New York commute situation, only this time it was Strasbourg-Paris. Sundays I'd get on the night train, go to sleep, and get off in Strasbourg. Friday afternoons I'd jump on a train in Strasbourg and come back here to Paris. Luckily we had a *jeune fille au pair* living in the house. But it was clear from the start this could only be a provisional solution.

*Q: One year.*

WILLETT: Barely a year, nine months. I'd have to start working on a solution *tout de suite*. I had friends in the Department; the question was, which one should I turn to? I knew I was in for another separation, but I didn't want to go too far away. I couldn't ask Chantal to quit her job. So I had to find someplace where I could at least get home on a reasonable basis every couple of months, every three months. Freck Vreeland, our Ambassador in Morocco and a personal friend from different posts...

*Q: Both Rome and Paris.*

WILLETT: Exactly. He called me up and said, "Come on down and be my DCM. There's somebody here who's already in place, but she'll leave eventually. If you accept the political counselor slot, when she leaves you can be DCM. It's a good job for you: big embassy of 400 people, a career enhancing job." I said, "Look, I don't care whether it's career enhancing. The fact is that Morocco's about as close to Paris as I'm going to find, because I won't get another European post." So it worked out. I got in my Land Rover and drove to Sete to catch a ferry for Tangier.

*Q: John, before we get too far into Morocco, you might deal a little bit with Strasbourg, with being Consul General. That's the seat of the European Parliament. A previous consul general - was it Robert Hormats - had been target of an assassination attempt*

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in Strasbourg, was it not? In brief, how was your nine months there? What were the highlights? What was it like to be Monsieur le Consul General?

WILLETT: I had a reporting job to do there, a straightforward reporting job, and that was the Council of Europe. Catherine Lalumière, then secretary general of the Council of Europe, came to have confidence in me. The U.S. is not a member of the COE, but we had observer status. We could hang around certain meetings. In addition I dealt with the mayor of Strasbourg, a high-profile woman named Catherine Trautmann, now minister of information in the current Jospin government. I greatly enjoyed talking with this cultivated lady, and I've kept the medal she gave me when I left town.. She has a degree in Protestant theology, and she told me she 'd written her thesis on Mary Magdalen. I said, "Oh, Mary Magdalen," and she said, "Yes, but not the one you think." Apparently somewhere in the Bible there's another Mary Magdalen.

I might mention that reporting out of Strasbourg was a cumbersome, because you had to be your own communicator.

*Q: You had some staff in the consulate?*

WILLETT: Oh, yes, there was a staff of eleven locals.

*Q: So you were the only American.*

WILLETT: The only one.

*Q: Strictly reporting, not carrying out demarches or trying to influence, or did you do some of that?*

WILLETT: Yes. I'd go see the Secretary General of the Council of Europe or her senior staff. In their crazy system, the European Parliament trucks all its files over from Brussels every two weeks and holds meetings in Strasbourg. When the two weeks end, they truck everything back. This is because the French refuse to concede that Strasbourg not be a

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seat of the European Parliament. It has nothing to do with the Council of Europe. The EC Parliament still sits two weeks of every month in Strasbourg. A nutty situation, but I can't imagine the French would alter their position.

For communications I'd have to go in a little safe-room with a computer I barely understood and send classified cables over the phone line, kind of classified e-mail. I never really got it right, and my year there was frustrating in one sense because of the communications problems. A couple of times professional communicators came over from Germany to help me with the machinery. Despite these problems, I still managed to draft some worthwhile messages.

Besides, there were interesting outside events. Dick Walters, whom I'd worked with at various times, came up once, and we had a good weekend.

*Q: What would bring him there?*

WILLETT: I can't remember exactly. A meeting with Europeapoliticians and diplomats...?

*Q: Target of opportunity? The people were there that he needed tsee about something?*

WILLETT: Something like that. He gave a talk while there, but not in his capacity as ex-CIA or perm rep to the UN or anything. And since there are a lot of American companies in Strasbourg, I made sure to became active in the Strasbourg chapter of the American Chamber of Commerce, once arranging a lunch with mayor Trautmann as guest speaker.

The city itself is unimaginably beautiful, a pleasant place to live. The CG's official residence is a historic place, very grandiose, lovely grounds, statues and walks, but I thought it would be too much to live there. Since the assignment was so brief, I chose to live in the apartment over the Consulate. It would have been ridiculously expensive to keep that huge residence up and running with a full staff for one person who lived in it only five days a week. I did my entertaining in the Consulate proper or in restaurants.

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The most dramatic event of my short assignment was the farmers' demonstration against U.S. agricultural policy. I got permission from Paris (who checked with the Department) to allow riot police into the Consulate. We had to close down for the day, lower the shutters, whatever. The outside walls were splattered with eggs and tomatoes, but otherwise there wasn't much damage. At one point the demonstrators wanted me to come out and accept a petition. I said to the head policeman on duty, "Let me go out and take their petition. I think I ought to do it." He advised against it, and I felt that since they were on hand to protect me, I ought to follow the advice. But I kind of regretted it; I should have gone out and accepted that petition. It turned up in the mail next day.

I remember, too, the trade fair in Nancy, with its American theme. U.S. products were on display, and all these American cowboys showed up. I was invited as a guest speaker, and Chantal came with our two boys.

My duties also included speaking at American cemeteries, before those endless rows of white crosses. The people in the Alsace and Lorraine d#partements are generally pro-American, which is unusual in France. There was even a parade of American World War II army vehicles, jeeps and halftracks and things, passing by with American flags waving in the breeze.

Q: Well, John, we left you before in your jeep heading towards Morocco with an agreement to be political counselor for starters and move up to DCM, so you got there. How did it play out?

WILLETT: I got there with dengue fever, so it played out slowly at first. I moved into the political counselor's big house down the street from the Embassy.

Q: *In which I lived.*

WILLETT: An art deco house.



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*Q: A lovely house.*

WILLETT: Yes, a lovely house. And I moved into the political counselor office. POL [Political] consisted of four American officers and a couple of secretaries. Joan Plaisted was DCM, and there were some tensions between us. I knew Joan from Paris in the '70's. Understandably, she may have seen me as something of a threat, since Freck Vreeland and I were close.

Then, something unexpected happened. George Bush lost the election, and instead of allowing Vreeland to stay on until the new administration came up with a substitute, President-elect Clinton made clear his intention to let go all political appointees. Republican nominees were told to leave by the date Clinton would take the oath of office.

It was a real shock to Freck when he received a telegram telling him to start packing his bags. Suddenly he left, and the embassy sat vacant for a long time. Joan Plaisted became chargé, and I became acting DCM, moving up to the front office. This period lasted more than a year; so I had, in essence, eight or nine months with Freck Vreeland, something more than a year as acting DCM, then eleven months with Ambassador Ginsberg.

The Embassy's main issue was, as always, the intractable Western Sahara question — which was still in the UN — and Polisario, the political and military movement in the Western Sahara. The Polisario has very able diplomats. They're in the UN and in Washington, on the Hill. In addition Polisario has help from the Algerians, who are terrific diplomats. Polisario doubtless learned its diplomatic techniques from the Algerians.

The Department was, and is, also interested in the Islamist question in Morocco, and in Moroccan-Algerian relations. It was interested in the pipeline from Algeria through Morocco up into Spain, and in Morocco's growing ties with the EC. All this made for a steady stream of reporting out of the Embassy; and even as acting DCM, I still had to do a lot of hands on political reporting, because there weren't enough people to do it all.

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There was a brilliant young FSO4 in the Political Section named Tom Daughton. I got him the Director General's Award for reporting. It's not just another meritorious honor award, but goes once a year to one person. A lot of money, and a prestigious item to have in ones personnel file.

Really I had the two extremes in that Embassy: Daughton and another officer, who was hopeless and on whom I had to write a deleterious efficiency report, the first really bad efficiency report I'd written in my Foreign Service career. In general the Embassy ran smoothly. The Moroccan staff was competent, but morale was mixed. American men got along okay, but the women, in that Arab society, always felt they weren't taken seriously.

*Q: The women officers.*

WILLETT: No, the wives. I think most Moroccans preferred dealing with a man. That's just the way their society in general is set up. Be that as it may, they had Joan as Charg# for over a year.

There were periodic terrorist threats, of course, and the Embassy would have to go on alert. I never felt threatened; I just lived my life. The Ambassador's Residence remained vacant during that long period. I stayed in my house and Joan stayed in the DCM's house. It worked out fine.

*Q: Well, as you first got there, Freck Vreeland must have had an agenda. What did that look like? Of course, as you said, he expected to be there for a full tour. The election was a surprise. I think he was remodeling his residence and didn't even live in it for much of the time. But what were some of his goals, and how might they have played out?*

WILLETT: Inevitably any U.S. ambassador in Morocco is sucked into the Western Sahara problem. I can't say the Moroccans took us for a ride on this, though it was as important for them as, for example, Alaskan statehood would be for the United States. They could no more imagine losing the Western Sahara than we could imagine losing Alaska, and Alaska

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isn't even tied to us geographically. The Moroccan government has infinite patience. After all, the monarchy in Morocco, the Alawite dynasty — I'm not telling you anything — is the oldest, I believe, standing (or sitting) monarchy in the world, 340 years old. The King has great patience. As General Walters said to me, "People have been predicting this country will go to hell since I came here in 1943. They've been wrong for 50 years." The Moroccans are very different from their Algerian neighbors in character.

Q: Let's come back to Morocco towards the end of our time with the general observations. But working through, then, Freck Vreeland probably didn't have the time to make a mark as far as his agenda, what he hoped to accomplish there. He barely cantered around the course, met people, was — as all new American ambassadors are — couscoused to death.

WILLETT: Yes, well, there was one slight cloud. In the early seventies he happened to have been serving in Morocco in another capacity when one of the assassination attempts on the King took place. People said that when Bush named him ambassador, there was some concern in the palace. A previous ambassador had, in effect, been snubbed by the King. He, this former ambassador, had been preparing to participate in a meeting in Washington, when the King was on a state visit there. As I heard it, Hassan II in essence requested the Americans to have the Ambassador excluded from the meeting.

Q: *Dick Parker, who had been virtually expelled.*

WILLETT: Yes.

Q: *That was quite a while ago.*

WILLETT: Quite a while ago.

Q: *Yes, different circumstances.*

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WILLETT: Different circumstances. Anyway Freck Vreeland wasn't able to pursue his agenda because he left so quickly. He was understandably bitter about the way the Clinton Administration handled his departure, especially so when he saw that the job sat empty for a year, with him living right down there in his place in Marrakech. Nor did the Moroccans like the situation.

Q: The fact that there was such a long gap, they felt, as many countries in that situation did, that they weren't being given their due, that Washington treated them as a second-class country, that we weren't interested in them.

WILLETT: Well, yes and no, because they knew that the USG considers Morocco in a special light. After all, there was a military tie with Morocco. We had listening stations there. The Moroccans had allowed us to implant ourselves and expected in return special treatment from Washington. They couldn't understand why we were not 100 per cent on their side in the Western Sahara problem. And even though we quietly assured them we had no objections to their annexing, in essence, the Western Sahara, so long as it was performed with some sort of plebiscite, that wasn't enough for them. They wanted really blind allegiance to their point of view. We had to walk a line between Morocco and Algeria, and between Morocco and the Polisario.

Q: So you had this long transition. You were in the experience of management, as the acting DCM; you were trying to keep the peace between the military assistance mission, the defense attach# office, and a declining aid apparatus. Aid levels were dropping. You had to butt some heads. How was that experience? How was it working with the charg#? How did the place run for that year?

WILLETT: I think it's always a bit difficult for host country locals to accept secondary figures running an embassy. Everywhere in the world, I believe, they prefer, for their own prestige, to be working for an ambassador. This said, the Embassy was run capably, though no major innovations were undertaken. It's hard to innovate when you're a

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charg# or an acting DCM. You've got to be careful there. Even changes enacted by an Ambassador's predecessor sometimes cause trouble. When Ginsberg came in and saw the Residence, he was outraged that U.S. money had been spent to decorate it in a manner he considered inappropriate.

*Q: That was by the preceding ambassador.*

WILLETT: By Freck. Ginsberg had it all gutted, so to speak, and done up to his taste. Between you and me, I preferred Vreeland's style? I don't recall, Dick, any major innovations while the Embassy was run by a charg#.

*Q: You were caretakers.*

WILLETT: Sort of. I will say the place became more physically attractive. I mean it's a ramshackle, ugly building, but Joan fixed it up a bit, put up Moroccan decorations and what not. She was good at opening up her residence to locals and Americans, letting them use her swimming pool, holding informal dinners for staff, etc. But for my entire stay in Morocco, morale in the Embassy was terrible, just terrible.

*Q: You felt neglected by Washington and out at the end of the tree, the branch?*

WILLETT: No, it was more in the families. People didn't like Morocco, didn't like the Moroccans, didn't particularly like the food. They were not happy campers, and they wanted out. People would come then curtail, or wives would go into depressions. One of the Ambassador's big jobs, and I know Vreeland worked a lot on this, was helping the CLO try to improve morale. But you can't, really. A taste for the exotic is either in you or it's not. You either love living abroad in foreign cultures, or you don't. And if you don't, there's no amount of parties at the Ambassador's residence that's going to make you feel better. As for me, I had a wonderful time there. I had my horse and could go riding with friends on weekends. I had a job I enjoyed. And my wife and our kids got down every two or three months, or I would zoom up to Paris for a few days.

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Q: And despite any earlier misunderstandings you mentioned with the charg#, you worked well as a team at the level of a country team? It was collegial?

WILLETT: It was collegial, though I can't say there was real warmth between the charg# and me. I didn't feel she respected me for what I was best at, and I'm sure she sensed that I didn't always respect her approach. There was occasional tension between us. At this point, I knew Morocco was it, the end for me. I was pretty forthright in stating my views on things, even after Ginsberg arrived.

Q: Before his arrival, you were really coordinating a good many matters of policy with Washington, presumably with the then country director Steve Buck. He was a person of particularly strong views. How was that coordination process?

WILLETT: Difficult. Buck had strong views on the Western Sahara.

Q: *He had served in Algeria, I believe.*

WILLETT: Yes, and in Nouakchott. Indeed, I remember meeting Steve Buck — but I only realized it later — before I entered in the Foreign Service, on a trip in my Land Rover. I stayed a couple of nights in the Ambassador's residence in Nouakchott and met him at a party. This was after I'd been accepted, but a few months before taking the official oath.

Q: *You were coordinating with him by secure phone on a weekly basis.*

WILLETT: Yes, by secure phone, by telegrams. We all found him a somewhat argumentative guy, and for his part he thought we'd gone local, that we were too much in the Moroccans' camp. He felt he was bringing us back to a position that took American interests more into account. Well, I didn't see it that way at all. I felt then, as in every post where I'd served, that I always kept American interests meticulously in the forefront (especially in a country like France, or in the francophone countries like Tunisia or Morocco, where I could be suspected, with all that francophony behind me, of somehow

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having a penchant for the French point of view). I thought those of us making policy in Rabat pretty hard-nosed, but I guess Steve Buck didn't agree.

Q: As DCM you were trying to conduct the orchestra, get a flow of reporting from the consulate in Casablanca, develop a different perspective from there? How was that?

WILLETT: Well, reporting from consulates is always a touchy affair. When Ginsberg got there, he more or less insisted that every cable Casablanca sent out, even one saying that it's five o'clock in Casablanca and raining, had to be cleared in Rabat.

Q: At the time you were the acting DCM, you were encouraging, suggesting topics, and trying to promote the independence of reporting from there?

WILLETT: Yes, I liked Anne Carey, who was consul general. I thought she was doing a good job and was an attractive person intellectually. And I liked her husband, John McNamara. They were good for us down there, activist, self-starting. I did encourage independent reporting, except on policy cables. But as I say, this was pretty much nipped in the bud.

*Q: So the new Ambassador came out. He was a pretty hard-charging, business-oriented type. How did that transition evolve?*

WILLETT: With difficulty. I worked okay with him, but sometimes with real effort on my part. He did acknowledge the fact that I'd dealt with the Western Sahara in New York, in Washington, and on the spot, and that I knew what I was talking about. When I wrote an analytic message on where we might go with the problem, he couldn't just toss it in the basket. On the other hand, his viewpoint on the Western Sahara sometimes took insufficient account of the Moroccans' capacity to be obdurate, to dig in their heels. He felt that somehow or other during his tenure he was going to resolve the question, while I and others tried to make clear that it would be around for a long time to come. But he did have

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innovative ideas, brought people in and got them dashing about (sometimes in uncertain directions). There were tensions between him and Joan.

*Q: You were still there as a DCM aspirant. Freck had brought yothere with this, and he was then through. How was that?*

WILLETT: When Freck left, I realized there had been a serious change in the direction my boat was headed. So I said to myself, Okay, this is it; you've stretched this out as long as you can, now you've got to start thinking about when it's going to end, how it's going to end. I was correct to do so, and to accept the permanence of the political counselor posting. Things ended earlier than I expected, because a cable arrived in January of '95 offering a cash incentive to retire, one of those \$25,000 cash incentives. It said, "You have to be out of the Department by April 3rd of this year."

*Q: So you took the money and laughed all the way to the bank.*

WILLETT: Well, it's hardly what you'd call a "golden parachute," but I did go to Ginsberg and say, "You know, it's time for me to go home." I think he was genuinely sorry to see me leave, because he did count on me for a lot of work and a lot of reporting. I'd been careful, when he arrived, as I'd been in Paris (where I was acting political counselor for months before the new political counselor, Kim Pendleton, came in), to step back where I'd been. This is important in the Foreign Service. Just because you've sat up there doesn't mean that when the person slated to fill the slot arrives and obliges you to move down again, you have the right to keep acting as if you were still DCM, charg#, whatever. So I went back to being a political counselor, which was hard for me.

Q: Well, he had strengths, outside ties, and a business focus, but he was pretty new to diplomacy, Marc Ginsberg. You must have, as the political counselor, helped him a good deal in his initial contacts. He was still trying to master French, so you certainly must have gone with him or pointed him toward the Palace and the other power centers in Morocco.



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WILLETT: Yes, I did.

Q: You mentioned his settling in with the DCM was not an easy proposition.

WILLETT: Well, Joan had gotten comfortable in the ambassador's office, like me in the DCM's.

*Q: So it was hard to go back to being a DCM.*

WILLETT: Yes, probably as hard for her to go back to being a DCM as for me to go back to being political counselor.

*Q: Perhaps harder.*

WILLETT: Yes, perhaps harder, that's right. But I sensed real antipathy sometimes between Joan and Ginsberg, which I don't believe was the case with me. Now and then Ginsberg and I had run-ins with one another, but they were essentially on policy questions. I sensed that the confrontations with Joan were more character clashes. Maybe she wasn't so pliant as I, and I don't mean this as criticism of her.

Q: I always felt with Marc Ginsberg that he respected the person who would come back and argue the case, and I'm sure you would have done that on the Sahara. I had the impression that he, maybe because of his business focus, had some difficulties with the then economic counselor, Jack Aubert, who I think curtailed, in fact, resigned or retired from that post.

WILLETT: A lot of people quit.

*Q: Presumably because of the bad morale you mentioned.*

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WILLETT: Yes, but Ginsberg added to the bad morale. People couldn't take it. They left. Then there were scandals over in AID. Some of the AID advisers were apparently doing things not quite legal, making money on the side.

*Q: Had there not been equal scandals and perhaps funds missing in USIS as well?*

WILLETT: You know something I don't.

*Q: Earlier, I believe, there were some.*

WILLETT: Oh yes, there was a controversy, before my time there, anin fact, a woman in USIS grieved.

*Q: And some of the locals were, I believe, dismissed for misuse of funds.*

WILLETT: This didn't happen on my beat. But I see we're getting tthe end.

Q: This is the end, John. Why don't you step out of Morocco a little bit and think about where it's going? You mentioned Vernon Walters's confidence in its longevity and the stability of the monarchy, but what do you yourself think after your experience there? It seems to me the case that the traditional support for the monarchy in the Imperial cities and hostility to the monarchy in the countryside, the Bled, has entirely reversed in the last couple of decades in Morocco. The strong support's today in the Bled, and the cities, particularly the biggest ones, Casablanca, are less certain. Do you agree with that? What do you think it means for the future? What do you think that country will look like into the millennium?

WILLETT: The Bled, of course, includes the Rif, in the north, where opposition to the King is still strong. But that's another problem. You're right to say that opposition to the King has grown in the cities. That said, I think it's directed more towards a man who's been around so long than to the concept of monarchy.

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People like to pooh-pooh Sidi Mohamed, the heir apparent. I met him on a couple of occasions. They talk of him as a bit fey, not a serious guy, a man who won't be able to manage the reins of power. On the other hand, he seems more liberal than his dad. Now, would the country fall apart under liberalism as practiced by Sidi Mohamed? Or would Rachid, his younger brother - who's a hard-nosed guy and more like his father - be the better one to take over? There have been periodic rumors that the King came close to disinheriting, so to speak, Sidi Mohamed, with a plan to name Rachid, his second son, as heir apparent. This hasn't happened. Meanwhile Sidi Mohamed took a legitimate graduate degree at the University of Nice. He defended his thesis the way any French student would have to.

*Q: A degree by correspondence, no?*

WILLETT: Yes, but then he went and defended his thesis in person.

*Q: It was an unpublished thesis on the Western Sahara.*

WILLETT: No wonder he could defend it so well. But I still tend to agree with Dick Walters on this. Morocco is not Algeria, and I think *int#grisme* in Morocco is less likely to get out of hand for two reasons. In the first place the King, and presumably Sidi Mohamed who would succeed him, has always set himself spiritually, and physically, below the mullahs. In their public meetings he allows himself to be photographed sitting at a lower level than the imams, and the average Moroccan is sensitive to this. Now, how much it impresses the increasingly cynical modern city Moroccan remains to be seen. But I felt, while I was there, that the public at large still held the monarchy in esteem.

*Q: This is during the Ramadan "causeries"?*

WILLETT: Yes, exactly, when he dons the same hooded cowl as the mullahs. He has been - it must be said, like him or not - very adroit at balancing two ends against the middle. Secondly, religion and politics are closely intertwined in North Africa. Hassan II has

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the entire country behind him on the Western Sahara question. Only a small number of people I met while there oppose to the King on this, or feel the matter should be handled in a different way.

Q: So you leave Morocco guardedly optimistic about its ability. What about the U.S. and Morocco? The Moroccans have seen us a perhaps an antidote to overdependence on France. But over the years that's been with a very hefty level of economic and military aid that no longer exists with the strengthening of Europe and the EU. How do you see this bicentennial relationship, and where is it going? Moroccans also feel we've shifted focus with the collapse of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War and that we no longer regard them as strategically as we did.

WILLETT: Moroccan ties with France in particular, and with the EC in general, will remain close, so the Moroccans will roll with the punch. There's a special economic relationship, after all, between Morocco and the EC, one that may develop further. In addition, I think Rabat will accept that Washington hold Morocco with less ardor than we did in the past. I don't know. Perhaps I'm overly optimistic on this. I mean, I'm even optimistic about Algeria. I even believe Algeria is going to straighten its problems out, and that the future of North Africa, the future of the Maghreb, looks good, if Mother Nature doesn't sock it with too many droughts.

Q: Well, John, unless you have any areas of your long and distinguished, not necessarily typical, career you'd like to comment on, we'll bring this to a close.

WILLETT: It's been very enjoyable talking with you, Dick, and your questions have provoked a lot of thought in me. I do remember that day that I left the Foreign Service, put my bag on my shoulder and got on a ferryboat from Tangier to Algeciras. I left everything behind, my career, my horse, my livelihood, whatever. It was rough. But I don't regret it. I still keep up ties with a few friends in the Foreign Service, not many. This is not germane to the subject of our talks. I'll end here.

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Q: This then concludes the second and last session of the oral history interview with John Willett conducted December 22nd in Paris on the second floor of the Caf# Flore by Richard Jackson.

End of interview